

AMBASSADOR

1: SEEING RED

PATTY JANSEN

Ambassador 1: Seeing Red

Patty Jansen

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DIPLOMATS AT Nations of Earth often joked that when politics sank into a lull, something was about to explode. The greater the sense of we've-got-it-all-sorted-out smugness, the bigger the bang.

I was certainly far too comfortable, if jet-lagged and keen to get to my hotel, when I met President Sirkonen in his office in Rotterdam that afternoon. Nice and easy. I had received my commission from *gamra* with all the final details such as what time I needed to be at the Exchange. And tickets, by themselves worth more than my annual Earthly salary. Now I only needed the president's signature, and I would be off to my new job. Definitely too comfortable.

I had never been on first-name terms with the president, but while I sat there trying hard not to succumb to jet-lag, he chatted about my father, whom I had just visited, and who had finally retired from Lunar Base to his native New Zealand. Sirkonen opened the drawer of his desk and took something out, which he flipped across the gleaming wooden surface. I could do nothing but catch it. A datastick. I turned it over. The black plastic cover reflected the sunlight.

"What's on it?"

"You might find it useful. Think of it as some . . . personal advice, from me to you. We'll talk about it later, when you return for your first briefing." He shut the drawer with a thud as if closing the subject.

This was *highly* irregular. “Mr President, can I ask—”

He shook his head, and offered me a drink—Finnish vodka, best in the world, he said. While he poured, his hands trembled.

I should have insisted that he tell me what was wrong, but who was I? An unimportant, sending-out-our-feelers type of diplomat, expendable and twenty years his junior. Not the type of person to draw attention to his problems—with alcohol or otherwise.

We made a toast. The heavy scent of the vodka did nothing to improve my alertness.

“Mr Wilson, when you come back in six month’s time, you must present your report to the general assembly. We need to know in detail what sort of regimes we’re dealing with.”

I didn’t understand why he spoke in such empty generalities; I wondered when he was going to open that folder on his desk and sign the contract. Nicha, my Coldi assistant, was waiting in the foyer. We had a whole heap of work to catch up on. I was annoyed that Sirkonen had changed our meeting time at the last minute—the original meeting had been scheduled for tomorrow morning.

Sirkonen stopped speaking.

I stared at him, realising with embarrassment that I’d been off with the fairies. Was I meant to have said something? Was I breaking rule number one of the diplomatic circle: never show any sign of sleep deprivation?

An attack of dizziness overtook me. My vision wavered, as if the world were painted on a silk flag that flapped in the wind, and all the furniture was rimmed in a red aura. “Mr President, I’m—”

I just managed to put my vodka down. The glass hit the wood with a soft clunk, the only sound in the frozen silence.

There was a small sound from outside, a click.

As if stung, Sirkonen turned to the window; his eyes widened.

“Sir?”

The president opened his mouth, but a sharp crack interrupted his words.

I didn’t think. I dived off the chair into the hollow of safety

under the desk. The room exploded. Glass shattered, wood splintered. Something crashed on top of me.

The world went black.

Purple spots danced before my eyes. An alarm blared, sounding woolly through the ringing in my ears.

What the fuck. . . ?

Footsteps thudded in the foyer. The door burst open, crashed into the wall. People ran in. Many of them. Boots crunched over debris. The air exploded with voices.

“Mr President. Mr President?”

I squinted through half-closed eyes. I lay in a cocoon of semi-darkness, pinned down by something jagged that hurt my back, too heavy to push off. My head echoed with unfamiliar silence.

Nicha?

Somewhere in the room, someone groaned, a voice that wasn't Nicha's.

A man called out, “He's over here. Get a doctor! Now!”

Replies blared through comm units.

I tried again, picturing the thought sensor patches in my brain.
Nicha?

There was no reply, not even when I commanded the link to open completely. Yet Nicha had been waiting in the foyer. Well within the feeder's range.

I lifted a hand to the back of my head. My fingertips met my scalp, spreading slick wetness in my hair. Blood—I could smell it.

Of course, I'd handed my feeder in before I came into the President's office.

The president's office . . . an explosion. Bloody hell.

“Sir?” A male voice, much closer.

The pressure on my back eased.

And then, “Help me get this off.”

The pressure lifted. I rolled onto my side, blinking against light

that angled into the room from an unusual source. A large hole gaped in the wall where the window had been, the edges like jagged teeth of bricks and mortar. Through it, dusk-tinged clouds looked obscenely peaceful.

The room itself was a mess of glass, plaster and splintered wood.

A woman knelt by my side, in the uniform of the Nations of Earth forces, but with a red collar that said *Special Operations*. “Are you all right, sir?”

I sat up, rolling my tongue in my mouth. Dust crunched between my teeth.

“I . . . I think so.”

My head pounded. Blood dripped from a cutting board of slashes across my palms.

Shards of thick glass littered the carpet, the same shatterproof security glass which was used in spacefaring vessels. Supposedly unbreakable.

There were also fragments of the vodka glass, wet stains of the vodka itself, mixed with plaster from the ceiling, paper, and books—those priceless four-hundred-year-old volumes that had filled the shelves in the president’s office. And amongst all that mess copper-dark smears of blood—mine, I presumed.

The voice that drifted from the other side of the wrecked desk was weak, but unmistakably Sirkonen’s. “No, no, you don’t have to . . . I can . . .”

“I don’t think so, Mr President. You’re injured.”

The President was alive. I was alive. No idea what the hell had just happened, other than that I was simply alive, and glad of it.

The guard helped me to my feet and sat me down on the president’s sofa, my palms dripping blood on four-hundred-year-old furniture.

I managed a weak, “My hands.” Looking at them made me feel sick; everything made me feel sick.

“We’ll get another ambulance out in a minute.”

“But . . .” I didn’t want an ambulance. I—
Panicked voices. “He’s losing consciousness!”

People ran across the room. Two paramedics in orange overalls wheeled in a stretcher.

Someone flung a towel in my lap, which I wound around my bleeding hands as best as I could. The embroidered Nations of Earth symbol ended up on the outside.

Emergency crew lifted President Sirkonen onto the stretcher, his shirt ripped and wet with blood. They covered him with a silver blanket and put a mask over his face. The president tried to wave it away, his movement feeble. His Scandinavian tanned skin had gone very pale.

“Keep still, Mr President. We’ll have you in the hospital very soon.”

Then they were out the door.

A different guard, male, sat down next to me. “You’re Mr Cory Wilson, Union delegate?”

I nodded. Normally I would have corrected him—*gamra*, *not Union*—but that seemed a trivial, pedantic issue right now. I might work for *gamra*, the organisation that governed the Exchange, the means of interstellar travel, but right now, I faced him as a fellow human, and without the input from my feeder I felt this even more keenly. *Our* president had been attacked, and my job . . . was another world, literally.

“I’m sorry, sir. I need to ask some questions. Did you see anything?”

“No, just the window exploded.” A feeling niggled in the back of my head. “I couldn’t see outside. There was a curtain.” It now lay mangled on the floor. Then I remembered. “Sirkonen saw something. Just before it hit.”

Was it even an explosion? There’d been no fire. Just wavering air, and a red aura surrounding everything. No, that was probably because I was exhausted, my brain still operating on New Zealand time.

I rubbed my face with the top of my wrist. "Where is Nicha?"

A puzzled look crossed the man's face.

"My *zhayma*. He was waiting in the foyer."

The frown deepened. "Um, sir, are you speaking Isla?"

I was, wasn't I? Eight years of full-time training in Coldi, and I was no longer sure. The wrong language had the habit of slipping out when I was off-guard and tired.

Someone else behind my back said, "There was a person in the foyer, sir. I couldn't be sure about the gender."

"Union?" the other guard asked. I had the feeling he would have liked to have used the derogatory word *ethie*, from Extraterrestrial Humanoid.

"Yes."

I said, "He's my assistant. I need him here."

A small silence, and then, "I'll go and see, sir."

"Thank you." I leaned back on the couch.

I hadn't liked that silence, not at all. Nicha *was* all right, wasn't he? If not, I needed to get him to the Exchange immediately. Coldi bodies differed from ours in much more than their hair with iridescent highlights, purple, blue and green like a peacock, or their muscular build. While they could vary their body temperature, they reacted badly to hypothermia, meaning anything below forty Celsius. I imagined an emergency crew working on Nicha, giving him the wrong blood, not keeping him warm enough. The thought made me shiver. I had lived with Nicha for four years, spent most of my waking and sleeping hours with him as part of the *zhayma* concept. In the rigid hierarchical Coldi society, he was my equal, my companion, the other half of my job, my pillar, my hand that reached out to the many peoples of *gamra*. He was the reason they would talk to me openly; he was my translator for those languages and customs I'd had no opportunity to learn. An interviewing journalist had asked me what a *zhayma* was, and I'd explained it was like being married, but without the sex; but it was more. For Coldi people, it was pathological; they did everything in

pairs of two.

Why had I been so stupid as to leave Nicha in the foyer or hand in my feeder?

President's orders. Simple as that.

Uniformed personnel with guns crouched over the debris near the window. Red collars on their shirts betrayed that they all worked for Special Services and they, I remembered, were the spying division of the armed forces. Two of them sat on their knees, waving scanning chips over the debris. Damn expensive equipment that was, nanotechnology from the glory time before the wars. Way too expensive to produce these days.

Snatches of conversation drifted across the room.

“... like a bomb being thrown into the window.”

“... sure? He says Sirkonen saw something.”

“... have to get that on record ...”

Where *was* Nicha?

I struggled to the edge of the couch. Tested my legs, and then rose carefully to tap one of the uniformed men on the back. The man turned. “Sit down please, sir.” He, too, wore the emblem of the Special Services Branch.

Another said, “Ambulance is on its way.”

“I’m sorry, I ... I need to speak to my ... assistant.” I was more careful with language this time. Coldi words upset too many people. “He’s in the foyer.”

“I know. He’s being interrogated.”

Interrogated? “I need to speak to him.”

“Not yet, sir.”

“You shouldn’t interrogate him until I speak to him.”

There was a flicker of hesitation on his face. Maybe he heard the anger I tried to keep from my voice.

“Sir, there has just been an attack on the President. We need to —”

“I understand, but Nicha Palayi falls exclusively under *gamra* law. If you wish to interrogate him, you can apply to your local

gamra delegate, which happens to be me. Now I *will* grant that permission, because I understand that you need to speak to all possible witnesses, and I have no desire to withhold information. However, I want to see him first. I would also appreciate it if my feeder could be returned and my security staff were brought up here. They are at the security post downstairs.”

Goodness knew what those two young men had been subjected to, how bewildered and lost they must feel. They spoke some *Isla*, but with poor fluency.

The man snapped into a military salute. “Sir.” He turned on his heel and marched out of the room, no doubt to get a higher-ranked officer.

He didn’t return.

Two guards asked to search me. In my pocket, they found the datastick the president had given me. One guard turned it over; the black plastic surface reflected the light. “What’s on it?”

“I don’t know.” I wished to hell I knew.

“I’ll need to make a copy.”

“I’d rather you didn’t.”

“The investigating team will need to study every object present in this room.”

“It’s most likely information pertaining to my job. I’ve had no opportunity to look at it. It might contain material sensitive to *gamra* interests.”

He raised his eyebrows, like he wanted to say *The president has been attacked, isn’t that more important than extraterrestrials?*

“I assure you, sir, all material we collect is confidential.”

I nodded, by no means assured, but what could I do? Refuse and be treated as suspicious?

He took the datastick to a colleague at the door. Shit. Sirkonen had given this thing to *me*. Not to be pried at by Special Services.

He had been talking about Seymour Kershaw, my predecessor of sorts, who had disappeared at *gamra* headquarters in Barresh ten years ago. Now some idiot had made the story into a movie which

accused the Coldi, the dominant ethnicity within those sections of the galaxy serviced by *gamra*, of killing him. I hoped the information wasn't about Kershaw. The connection between it and the fictional allegations in the movie would be all too easy to make.

I could hear the questions from the press. Why didn't these aliens allow Earth investigators to see for themselves what had happened to their ambassador? Why did they keep such tight control on their precious Exchange—so that smart humans couldn't travel to other worlds and infect them with undesirable ideas, like democracy and religion?

And I could explain as much as I wanted: because *gamra* is familiar with the consequences of allowing different species to pursue their jurisdiction across interstellar space. It rarely ends well. Because you cannot translate law from one species to the other. And no one on Earth would listen to me.

Eight years of working with *gamra*, and I thought I was beginning to understand. Yet the main thing I understood was that these people might be our biological cousins on the human family tree, separated by fifty thousand years, or more, of isolation, but their physiology and mental hardwiring differed so much from ours that Earth hadn't even begun to understand.

I believed we desperately needed to set the incident aside and move on, because that's what *gamra* did, drowning conflicts in bureaucracy, because it was the only way to *keep* the Exchange network functioning in peace.

I got the datastick back, and managed to work it into my pocket with the bloodied towel. Shit.

Sirens wailed outside, but the promised ambulance didn't come, or if it did, was diverted elsewhere. Military hovercraft zoomed backwards and forwards across the part of the sky visible through the hole in the wall.

I was sore.

I was tired, barely having slept since my father had driven me

to the airport in Auckland thirty-six hours ago.

I was hungry.

I still clutched the filthy towel around my hands.

I caught the attention of a young Special Services officer. I thought it was the one I had asked about Nicha before, but all faces blurred in my mind.

“Look, I’ve been sitting here long enough. I asked to see my assistant. Where is he?”

“Sorry, sir. I asked the boss, but he must have been held up.”

And fuck you, too. “Ask him again, I . . .” I swallowed the words. No. Complaining wasn’t going to gain me any points. “I need medical care.”

His cheeks went red. “Sorry, sir.” He went out.

What the hell was going on here? I expected this kind of obtuse pass-the-buck-ery at *gamra*. They were good at that. I had not expected this kind of treatment here, in Rotterdam, at Nations of Earth.

Oh, blow their restrictions.

I wriggled one hand out of the towel. Pieces of glass glistened in deep cuts, which still oozed blood.

I smeared it on my jacket as I fished in the pocket for my comm unit. Ouch, ouch and ouch. Contrary to security regulations inside the President’s office, I turned the unit on.

It beeped.

Not Nicha. The ID told me that much.

“Eva?”

“Cory, there’s been an attack on the President.” The female voice with the Polish accent brought a wave of longing, of safety, of roast dinners with glasses of wine, and the distinctive smell of nicotine-free tobacco from her father’s pipe.

“I know, I’m in his office.”

“His—But you weren’t meant to see him until tomorrow!”

“There was a change of plan.”

“Oh Cory!” She burst into tears.

“Eva, please.” I forced my voice into the calmest tone I could muster. “I’m fine, tell your parents, but right now, I need to call—”

The connection went dead.

A uniformed figure stood before me, flipping shut an electronic device. “Sorry sir, no communication from this office.” He, too, belonged to Special Services.

“I want to talk to my assistant. Can you return my feeder? It’s in a basket on the secretary’s desk. I’ve been sitting here for a long time. *Gamra* will be asking questions about me.” *And if you don’t let me go now, I’ll give you more shit than you’ve ever seen in your life.*

“I’ll go and see, sir.”

He also vanished out the door that yawned like a portal to freedom.

Then a different man in uniform came in. “Mr Wilson, come with me please.”

“Are you taking me to my assistant?”

“Follow me, please.”

“Where are we going?”

“Out.”

Stupid question, Mr Wilson. *Out* was a definite improvement on *wait here*, so I stumbled to my feet, intending to give him an earful as soon as I faced a part of him that wasn’t his uniformed back. Waiting in the foyer was a female ambulance officer with a first aid kit. Hers was the first smile that greeted me for hours. The anger seeped away.

“Are you in much pain, sir?”

“Not too bad.” The pain had subsided into a dull throbbing, but the muscles in my hands were getting stiff. I was shivering, in need of infusion to counter the effects of my adaptation treatment. That medication and equipment was in my hotel room.

I glanced into the hall through the open doors, but saw no sign of Nicha, my guards or my feeder.

She made me sit in the secretary’s chair and took the towel off my hands.

One look. A grimace of her lips. "This will have to be treated, I'm afraid."

"I need to find my assistant." Nicha had to be going crazy without me.

Her face turned serious. "You need surgery to remove all the glass from your hands, sir."

"But my assistant . . ." And my feeder, and my guards . . . I glanced at my bloodied palms, repressing a shivering surge of nausea. She was right.

I think she saw that realisation in my face. Her tone softened. "Come, sir. I'm sure your assistant is in safe hands. You should worry about yourself now. You're injured and in shock."

She clipped her case shut and helped me up.

The hall and the stairways crawled with servicemen, Nations of Earth, Special Services, National Guard and ordinary police, all of them bristling with guns. The two-storey-high space hummed with voices in Isla, as well as Gaelic, Friesian and Neo-germanic, an unintelligible mush of languages new and old.

My guardian angel shouted, "Out of the way, out of the way. Ambulance personnel coming through."

Men in uniforms shuffled aside leaving some semblance of a path to the door, where an ambulance with flashing lights waited.

Neither Nicha nor my security guards were within sight.

THE HOSPITAL. Harsh lights and clanging of metal and doors. The smell of antiseptic on the air. I sat shivering, my head reeling, bathed in the smell of my own sweat. It wafted from under my jacket every time I moved. I hated it, felt embarrassed about it. At *gamra*, being clean, well-dressed and presentable was important. Coldi had an acute sense of smell.

The doctor didn't seem to mind. He poked about in my palms for buried pieces of glass with a frightfully long pair of tweezers. Even though they had given me an anaesthetic, I could feel some weird sensation of movement bordering on pain. With my adaptation treatment, my body reacted differently to medicines and anaesthetic seemed to be one of those things. Increased metabolism, I guessed, since I was on an acclimatisation course for living in a hot climate.

I told the doctor, but within a few lines of gruffly exchanged conversation, it became clear to me that he knew nothing about adaptation, and was convinced I ran a high fever. To top it off, his first language was Gaelic, and my New Colonist's version of *Isla* confused him. In fact, I spoke a dialect referred to by linguists as *Cosla*, and though the two had started out as the same language, they were now drifting further and further apart. My command of Gaelic didn't reach beyond asking directions in the street and half-understanding the answer. Worse, even—climatic adaptation was Coldi technology, and I doubted a lot of the terms had *Isla* translations.

During the long periods of waiting between treatments, I fumbled with my comm unit to get Nicha, or help from a *gamra* doctor at the Exchange who could explain in medical terms that increased body temperature was the whole point of adaptation, and that a yellowish skin taint came with my skin's increased resistance to ultra-violet light.

My comm unit wouldn't work. There was no reception in the emergency room. Then the charge ran out.

I was totally buggered, at the mercy of the system. *No, sir, you can't go. The doctor needs to see you again.* For fuck's sake! If only I had my feeder. What was happening to Nicha?

After the last doctor had looked at my hands, the last nurse had fiddled with my bandage and had given the last bit of advice and told me when to come back for a check-up, an appointment which I told them I couldn't keep, I was finally allowed to leave. My left hand resembled a mitten and they'd taped together the three middle fingers on my right hand, leaving me two thumbs and a pinky to deal with life. Wonderful.

By now, I was swaying on my feet and as I stood alone in the lift while it rumbled its way to the ground floor, I thought I was going to be sick. I leaned my forehead against the cool metal, swallowing bile. If I spewed here, they'd take me back up and the circus would start again.

The lift stopped and the doors opened. Yelling, shouting. Flashing cameras.

I stared at the seething mass of people, the last shred of energy draining from me. *Through there?* They had to be fucking kidding.

Two red-cheeked nurses and a lone security guard were pushing people back to the door.

The poor man shouted, "Outside please, people, this is a hospital. Please go outside!"

A woman behind the reception counter yelled into her headphones. "No, now! There's about a hundred in here. Yes, they're fucking journalists. Just send someone!"

Then someone discovered me in the lift. “Mr Wilson!”

Hundreds of lenses pointed my way.

“Mr Wilson!”

I jabbed at a random button with my left thumb, but the first of the news hawks were already at the lift, a man shoving his foot in front of the sensor light that stopped the doors shutting.

The questions flew like rotten eggs.

“Mr Wilson, can you tell us what happened?”

“How is President Sirkonen?”

“Mr Wilson, can you give us the Union’s position on this attack?”

“Mr Wilson, are you still going to the Union?”

I stopped, blinking at the sea of live cameras.

“Why on Earth would I *not* be going?”

The crowd hushed. All those reporters sank into an expectant, tense silence, broken only by the sounds of anxious breathing, and occasional beeping equipment.

A woman said, “I presume you have heard it’s a Union attack?”

“Is it . . .” My heart did a violent jump.

Shit.

The wavering image, the red aura.

Could it be. . . ? I didn’t know any technology that had those effects, but did that mean it didn’t exist? Shit, shit, double shit. Some of the non-cooperative actions by Nations of Earth guards started to make sense. I was a *gamra* employee; they didn’t know where my loyalties lay.

I tried to find the asker of the question in the mass. “Um—Madam?”

A woman wriggled forward, meeting my eyes.

“Melissa Hayworth, Flash Newspoint.”

About my age, short brown hair and a sharp nose. Fierce brown eyes. Just as fierce as her gutter-press employer.

She asked again, “Does this mean you’re withdrawing from your position?”

A moment silence. What to say? My stomach was playing up again.

“Ms Hayworth, for all I know, having sat in the president’s office and watched the investigators turn over every piece of debris, no one has drawn a conclusion about the perpetrators. I am sure we will hear about this from the police in due course, and before that time, I will refrain from speculating.”

I looked straight into the camera attachment on her shoulder. Sophisticated equipment, that. Had I been much younger and not feeling like shit, I might have waved to my father in New Zealand. This was beamed live all over the world.

“I’m asking you the question: are you still going?”

“Of course. For one, I’d be upset at having studied for nothing for eight years.”

It was a lame attempt at lightheartedness, but a few people laughed.

“Mr Wilson, what do you think will be the outcome of your tenure?” asked a different journalist at the front of the crowd. She carried two digi-cameras and an electronic notebook with the stylus dangling on a string. A conservative news service, that one.

“I believe that my candidature is vitally important, especially in times when many factors challenge the relationship between Nations of Earth and the entities of *gamra*. It is my task to keep this relationship alive and to facilitate dialogue.”

“The relationship has just been damaged,” Melissa Hayworth broke in again. “Or should I say: has been damaged further? For all we know, no satisfactory answer has been provided by the Union as to what happened to your predecessor. Someone makes a hypothesis—”

I opened my mouth—

“Yes, I know it’s only fictional, a harmless movie, but that is not how the Union will be viewing it, is it? They’ll be saying that we accuse them of killing Kershaw. You know they have funny ideas about fiction, and about justice.”

She was right of sorts, on both counts. The only *gamra* species present in any kind of numbers on Earth were the Coldi, and they didn't "get" fiction and their justice involved power plays and calculated murder.

"That's why they tried to kill the president!" someone yelled at the back of the crowd. A few others supported him.

My heart thudded. Oh damn, oh damn, this wasn't going to end well.

"That is wild speculation." My voice barely rose over the shouts. Instead, I faced the camera attachment on Melissa Hayworth's shoulder. "And may I add, too, that speculation ahead of the facts will only add fuel to the potential disagreement. I strongly advise calm on this subject until a police report becomes available."

I held some hope that the microphone would sift my voice from the racket. At the same time, I knew that denying an outrageous allegation was a lot less sensational than raising it, and that no matter who denied a *gamra* attack, some rumour would survive until the perpetrator was found, and perhaps even after that time.

And if I knew what was good for me, I would shut up until I had some official information.

"If you would please excuse me. I want to go to bed." I stepped out of the lift, looking over the sea of heads and waiting for it to part. But my name clearly wasn't Moses, and miracles were not going to happen for me.

A male journalist asked, "Mr Wilson, just where do you stand?"

And another, "Yes, you're defending the Union. For what reason? Is there anything you know that we don't?"

"Mr Wilson, is it true that you're a Union citizen?"

Damn. That was one subject I definitely *wasn't* going to touch. Not here, not now.

At that moment, thank the heavens, a group of security guards came down the stairs, and a man shouted, "Everyone—show us your media passes. Only official Nations of Earth media allowed.

Anyone else will be taken to the police.”

Some journalists started pushing for the door.

In the mayhem, I slipped behind the reception counter where the receptionist told me Nations of Earth had sent transport.

I sneaked out the hospital’s staff entrance where a white car with a Nations of Earth emblem on the door waited. Gusts of wind whipped my hair into my face, reflecting the anger that simmered inside me.

Is it true you’re a Union citizen?

Who fucking cared? My job was about working the current situation, patching up relationships that had gone from bad to worse in the past twenty years. No us or them.

I opened the car door and climbed in, dumping my reader on the seat next to me.

“Mr Wilson, sir, where to?”

I gasped.

A car with a driver. Regular vehicles had computers that asked your destination in a really annoying voice, and—in my case—usually asked again, because the voice recognition modules could never make much sense of my dialect.

I gave the man the address of the hotel, wondering where I had gotten the privilege for this personal service, and wondering if it was a good or bad thing.

Large weeping willows lined the road, ghostlike, pretty, and in late October wreathed in yellowing leaves. They were a remnant of the massive tree-planting operations from before the oil wars, a quaint memento of a time I had never known. Oil had become too expensive long before my birth. Even in the very first stories I read in primary school, vehicles ran on electric power and people used public transport.

A news bulletin blared on the radio, but the news was that there was no news, not about Sirkonen, and damn it, not about the perpetrators.

Not much later, I staggered into the hotel’s foyer. The reception

counter wavered before my eyes and the young man behind it looked far too awake. I stumbled through the conversation. Yes, my luggage had been brought up. The man gave me some weird looks.

Did I need to order breakfast for tomorrow? For how many people? More weird looks.

Could he scan two of my fingers for doorknob recognition? I held up my bandaged hands.

Oh.

Then he needed to find the manager to open the cupboard that held the old-fashioned access cards.

Finally, I was allowed to go. Looking back through the glass front door, I glimpsed the white car still outside, the driver a dark shadow within. Of course I knew the signs: I was under surveillance. *Great.*

Up in the carpeted corridor of the tenth floor, I found the reason for the receptionist's weird looks: my two guards stood in the corridor, one each on either side of the door to my room, like absurd wax statues. Both Indrahui, they were taller than me, broad-shouldered, had skin dark as obsidian with closely-set eyes and tightly curled hair, naturally bronze-coloured, in a bun; but one of the guards had dyed his hair black. The other wore sunglasses.

Both men bowed.

"Mashara." The term to address one's security.

Moss green eyes met mine, oh so briefly. Where Coldi were brazen and confrontational, Indrahui were painfully retiring.

"Mashara apologises profoundly, Delegate," said the one with the dyed hair.

Apologises? "The events were not your fault." Security forces had forced them to wait downstairs when I went to visit Sirkonen.

The man fidgeted. Clearly, they thought the situation *was* their fault.

"In all honesty, *mashara*. You did your job as well as you

could.” I used the forceful-you pronouns. The men were young, simple bodyguards; they were outclassed and outnumbered, never prepared for the turn of events. I hadn’t asked for them, but this morning at some ungodly hour in Athens, less than half an hour after I’d arrived from New Zealand, Amarru had insisted I take them. On the way back, when Sirkonen had signed my handover, I would be an official *gamra* delegate, and *gamra* delegates travelled with security, end of story.

“Delegate, *mashara* apologises.” More forcefully.

Embarrassed. Severely so. And I’d do well not to push them. “Then I shall accept the apology.”

After an awkward silence, the other guard, the one with the sunglasses said, “The Delegate became injured?”

“It’s nothing serious, thank you.” I felt bad for these two young men, was itching to ask them how they had made their way here, but one just didn’t, *did not*, ask one’s security those sorts of questions. One also didn’t ask their names. I was already causing raised eyebrows with my borderline informality. Pronouns, Delegate, pronouns. Hundreds of ways to say “you”, and only the most formal would be appropriate.

“Have *mashara* heard anything regarding my *zhayma*?”

The man with the dyed black hair inclined his head, still not meeting my eyes. “*Mashara* regrets not.” More embarrassment.

“The Delegate would appreciate if *mashara* would keep trying.”

He bowed. “Certainly, Delegate.”

I slid the access key through the slot next to the door and let myself into the room. Lights flickered on.

I let out a tension-filled breath. This half-baked delegate had certainly not handled his bodyguards too well.

The room’s control panel, triggered by my body heat, asked me, in a disembodied male voice, if I wanted to watch a show or a movie. I told it I wanted the power connected to the recharge sockets, and had to repeat that three times before the infernal piece of technology understood me.

Cosla, the New Colonist's dialect fast on its way to becoming a language in its own right. Where Isla, International Standard Language, was an amalgamate of what used to be English, Chinese, Spanish and new words related to technology, Cosla had adopted a good number of Coldi words and the Damarcian tendency to speak of oneself in third person in formal conversation. I had spoken it since I was ten and went with my father and Damarcian stepmother to Midway Space Station. I had perfected it as a teenager at Taurus Grammar, and tried to escape it, in vain, during my years as a student at Pavola, on Mars. I wasn't a child of this Earth, had never been. That's why I was suited to this position, and I was determined that people would come to appreciate it.

I plugged in my comm unit and rang the security post at the Nations of Earth complex. It was busy, not once, but all five times I tried. While I redialled and listened to the *busy* recording, *please log your message at the following ID*, I wriggled my bag open and extracted the infusor band, managed to loop it around my arm, tighten the strap with my teeth, and find the box of canisters.

I tipped them on the bed and slotted one into the receptacle. Click. A faint hissing sound. White powder whirled behind the glass as the infusor shot nanoscale dust into my arm. It tickled and a patch of cold spread out over my skin. I knew the treatment didn't work that fast, but I already felt a lot better.

Then I rang the hotel's reception. Could I please have something to eat; I didn't care what.

They could order a take-away, they said, and I told them yes, please. Then I tried to connect to security again while I waited for the food to turn up. My stomach rumbled.

This time, the call was answered by a man whose gravelly voice sounded like he had one hell of a hangover.

I cringed, but pushed ahead with my question. "I believe you took a man in custody at the president's office tonight."

"Sorry, Mister, I can't comment about that."

"But I've been—"

“Look, I’ve had about a hundred calls from the press—”

“I’m not from the press—”

“That’s what they all say.”

“But I’m Cory Wilson, his employer!” I almost screamed. I was losing it. Definitely not coping very well. Tired, sore. Out of patience. Out of ideas.

“Mr Wilson? Cory Wilson who was in the office with the president?”

“Yes.”

“Can I have your ID please?”

Pain spiking through my bandaged palms, I dug out my Nations of Earth identity chip, and patched him the number, flooding with relief, until he said, “He’s at the police station.”

So I called the police station. Same story. We don’t talk to the press. Hundreds of people have already called today. Please get off the line in case of a real emergency.

Fortunately, I didn’t have to scream this time to get myself believed. I didn’t think I could have. All I could see was Nicha pacing around a concrete cell. Coldi *hated* being alone; their need to be with their associates was pathological. If he could only hear my voice . . .

But the senior officer who came on the line said, “No, you can’t talk to anyone who’s in custody.”

“Nicha Palayi is a *gamra* citizen. He has the right to speak to the nearest *gamra* representative, which is me. And I don’t even know why he’s in custody.” And damn it, my voice wasn’t holding up.

“A reason which shall be heard in court.”

“Court? On what basis? What proof?” My heart was thudding. Was there proof?

“I’m not authorised to discuss that, sir.”

“He has the right to one call.” Clutching at straws now.

“He’s already used it.”

That hurt. Nicha hadn’t called me. It also made sense. He would

have called the Exchange. Maybe Nicha had tried to call me first when I was still at the hospital, where there was no reception. Shit. Besides, the Exchange would have been a better choice; that's what I would have done. At the Exchange, in Athens, they had staff to help *gamra* citizens out of legal trouble.

It still hurt. "I'd like to give him a message. Can you pass it on for me?"

"No, I'm sorry."

"Look, he's Coldi. He *needs* to hear a familiar voice or he'll start attacking the walls, or your personnel. I *have* to talk to him."

"You can't, I'm sorry."

"But we're leaving the day after tomorrow!" Frustration spiked.

That was no excuse and predictably got me nowhere. For as long as the police needed him, Nicha wouldn't be going anywhere, least of all out of the country, never mind off-Earth. After a minute or so more arguing, I gave up. I would have to contact someone higher in the department tomorrow.

Oh, if only I hadn't handed in my feeder.

While I had been talking, a black Indrahui shadow had snuck into my room to put a box on the table, where it sat exuding tantalising smells.

My stomach grumbling, I ripped the cardboard lid, but the contents didn't look half as nice as they smelled. The chickpea pita had gone soft with tomato sauce and fell apart when I poked it with the fork. Bloody hell. I'd paid—how much—for this? I swore that every time I left the Exchange life outside became more expensive.

Still, I was hungry and I ate it, half-cold. Couldn't stop thinking of how Nicha loved chickpea pita—not this bland stuff: he made his own in the unit we shared at the Exchange complex in Athens, which was like a *gamra* enclave on Earth. We would eat it on the balcony, looking at the city stretch out towards the hazy horizon, discussing some theoretical issue. Dip-length of Exchange anpar threads as a relationship to the distance from the galactic centre,

things like that.

I wiped my eyes with the back of my bandaged hands. Damn Nicha.

I picked up my unit again and pressed the one-button shortcut for my office at the Exchange. The beeper rang, and rang, and changed tone several times before the call was answered by a young man at general reception who sounded like he hadn't even heard the news about Sirkonen. Some of the people over there got so damned insular, like they were an island of civilisation on a barbarian world, populated with Neanderthals unable to hold a conversation—the Neanderthals being us.

Deep breath, Mr Wilson.

Anyway, the young man knew nothing. Leave a message and call back tomorrow.

I leaned my head in my hands, remembered too late that they hurt.

What was I going to do? Was there anyone else I could try?

Gamra people on Earth had a database: an extensive directory of local extraterrestrial contacts, people who would always help you if you were a *gamra* citizen, which I was, yes nosy journalists, having passed the exam three years ago.

I froze, staring at the opposite wall, horrified that the option had crossed my mind.

That *gamra* help me—against my own people, whom I was to represent?

Gamra loyalties, and Coldi ones, too, spread out like an interconnected web. There was no either/or. A person was the sum of his or her ties, often to wildly different and sometimes opposing camps. Always in pairs, always spreading outwards, reaching like little spider veins without regards for societal boundaries. Once there was a boundary, a break in the network, society fractured. Nations of Earth would never understand. Once I used *gamra* intelligence against them, I might as well resign.

One last option: the unofficial mantra amongst the bureaucrats

of Nations of Earth was: if in trouble, send it to your boss. I didn't like the attitude, but I was running out of ideas.

I selected another ID, which rang four times before it was answered with a muffled, "Hmph . . . whozzat?" A female voice.

"Delia, it's Cory here."

"Cory . . ." The sound of rustling. "What the fuck is the time?"

I glanced at the clock. It was 1:35 am. "Oh—I'm sorry, I was at the hospital . . ."

"Fuck, Cory." More rustling. Of sheets, I was sure by now. "How is Sirkonen?"

"I don't know. No one's saying." How could she sleep while all this was going on?

A sigh. "Fuck, Cory. Where are you?"

"I'm at the hotel now, but I have a problem. Nicha hasn't come back here. The police say he's been held overnight and they won't give me any information on why. I need to talk to him and I was wondering if you—"

"I? Cory, I'm a Nations of Earth employee. He's Union. How am I supposed to do anything?"

"Because within Nations of Earth, you have far more authority than I."

"*Not* to inquire about a Union citizen. I have no authority to do that. Cory, if the police say they have a reason to hold him overnight, then that's what they will do. There is nothing, *nothing*, I can do about that."

"But you know about the Coldi need to be with someone. He'll go crazy alone."

"Let his Union look after that."

"I'm trying, but I'm not getting through!"

A small, awful silence. "At this time of the day? No, of course not. Go to bed."

Thousands of swear words whirled through my mind, not all of them in Isla. But there was *mahzu*—a Coldi word meaning calm or pride. A person must maintain it, because to do otherwise would

be embarrassing as well as counterproductive. So as calmly as I could, I said, “Good night.”

“Good night, Cory.” Oh, did the ice in her voice chill me.

I dropped my comm unit on the table and sat there, panting, hearing my own voice, *I’m trying, but I’m not getting through*. And then the little silence as Delia processed that sentence, and found it meaning, *I’m in discussion with gamra. I am gamra before I’m Nations of Earth*. And that was exactly the accusation oft levelled at me.

Oh damn, that was not smart.

Delia was right; there *was* nothing I could do, not to get to Nicha, nor to undo that horrible slip of the tongue.

Shit. Shit, shit, shit.

I went into the bathroom and turned on the tap in the bath. I sat under the gurgling stream, taking care not to wet my bandaged hands, until I’d used up the room’s daily hot water allowance. Steam rose from the surface of the water, warm and comfortable, but if I had hoped it would make me sleepy, I had been mistaken.

Thoughts whirled in my head. Nicha’s face as I went into the president’s office, his gold-flecked dark eyes, almost without whites, his hair tied traditionally in a ponytail. Sirkonen’s nervous talk, his sudden turn to the window and then—bang. Space-proof glass. That must have taken some explosion.

I knew there *were* hand-held, Coldi-produced weapons which could shatter walls, so I didn’t think they’d have trouble with glass, no matter how space-proof.

But why suspect Nicha? Just because he happened to be the only *gamra* person close to the president’s office? Nicha could never have *done* anything. He’d been waiting in the foyer. Even Sirkonen could confirm that. The secretary had been there. He could confirm it, too. They had to be fucking kidding. Thoughts chased each other through my mind.

I heaved myself out of the bath, found something vile and strong in the minibar and downed it in a couple of gulps.

Talk about Sirkonen . . . I made a grab for my jacket, dug the

datastick from the pocket—ouch—and slid it into the reader.

The first page was empty, as if title and author had been removed. I scrolled down. Text and diagrams flashed over the screen. There were maps, many of them, with coloured areas, and large blocks of text with long words like “subequatorial jet stream”, “closed cell systems”. Pretty dry scientific stuff. This might be something of interest, but to me, it hardly looked dramatic.

I took the datastick out and slid it back in my pocket. I’d made the right decision not to make a fuss over it.

Then I settled in bed with my reader, flicking aimlessly through the world’s news services. No news about Sirkonen other than what I already knew. A terse statement prepared by Sirkonen’s chief of staff, peppered with words like “grave concern for his health.”

The weather. A low-pressure area moving over western Europe. Wind and rain expected. Nothing new there, either.

South Africa had cemented its unbeaten position in cricket.

Something about a scientist who had disappeared. I had no doubt the story would have made the headlines had it not been for the attack on Sirkonen.

I fiddled a bit with the puzzles, trying to solve the crossword; but by that time the effect of the drink kicked in, and I started to feel sleepy.

It took three attempts to get the room control to turn off the light, but finally I crawled into bed.

My head spun.

My palms throbbed.

It was too hot in the room.

Acid burned in my stomach.

I was *not* tired.

All the while I lay on the bed staring at strips of light moving over the ceiling as trams passed on the road outside, instead seeing the sails track lazily across the Bay of Islands, visible from my

father's spare bedroom window. Midday sun, wind in my hair.
Nicha's laughter.

Damn jet lag.

Oh, damn. I had completely forgotten to ring Eva. What sort of fiancé was I?

SOMEONE BANGED on the door, hard.

I raised myself on my elbows, the sound still reverberating in the woolly space between my ears and my brain. Darkness.

Green letters on the bedside clock glared 6:59. Last time I had seen those numbers they said 5:31.

Bloody hell. *Nich*’?

The eerie silence echoed inside me. No chatter, no garbled curses from Nicha’s thoughts. The room control must have noticed me move, because the annoying male voice asked me if I wanted lights on. I swore at the man-in-the-box, and to my great surprise he turned on the bedside light.

The banging had moved further down the hall, a muffled sound, accompanied by a male voice.

I scrambled out of bed, and as I told the room control to open the door, I realised what the man had shouted: *breakfast*. Two lots of breakfast in fact, on a tray on the floor. One for me, one for Nicha. That really brought it home to me. Nicha, alone in a police cell, pacing around, clawing at the walls.

“Good morning, Delegate.”

The two guards stood on either side of the door.

I swallowed emotion, blinked. The tray blurred before my eyes. Blinked again. Bent down to pick it up. Pain spiked through my palms. Oh shit, my hands.

One of the men jumped into action and picked up the tray, handing it to me with an intense look of those closely-set moss-

green eyes. Did he see how much I was falling apart?

“Any news, *mashara*?”

“No news, Delegate.” Was that a cringe?

I balanced the tray on my arm, carried it inside and manoeuvred it onto the table, awkward as hell. When I flicked the lid off one of the plates, the smell of fried eggs billowed from underneath. No bacon. The hotel didn’t offer oysters for breakfast and I hadn’t wanted to bother Nicha with the smell of the meat of a vertebrate animal, which Coldi people didn’t eat. Nicha’s presence was everywhere.

I glanced at the clock. It was too early to start ringing.

I pushed a chair back with my foot, sat down and dragged my reader by the charging cord, finding the site of the World Newspoint service with only the touch of one thumb. A single headline across the top of the page screamed *Attack* in huge letters. There was a live shot of the ruined window of Sirkonen’s office and another of an ambulance driving off said to have contained the president. Nothing on how Sirkonen was. At least that meant he was still alive. Let’s stay positive; although I felt that if there were any positive news, they would have published it, too.

My comm unit beeped.

I jumped up and retrieved it from the table next to the door, where it had been recharging. I pressed “answer” while fumbling with the earpiece and was blasted by a high-pitched squeak.

Ouch. A relay.

I ran across the room again, flung the unit next to my reader and, with my unbandaged left thumb, activated the wireless communication interface.

Someone from outside, off-planet—relayed through the Exchange.

The screen went white and at the top appeared the Coldi text, *Sender 876735475-02 1.24 Beratha.*

By then, I knew. Beratha was the second-largest city of Asto, the Coldi homeworld. It hosted a massive armed forces base. I

knew only one person in Beratha: Nicha's father.

While the bacteria in the crystalline screen worked to display the next lines of text, I scrambled under my discarded and bloodied shirt for the Coldi keyboard module, since I needed my feeder to get the thought sensor working in Coldi, and since I didn't have my damn feeder . . . I found the keyboard projector and plugged it in while unfolding the stand from the bottom of the pen-sized device so it stood straight up, its "eye" pointing at the table. A small light on the cylinder activated and the one hundred and twelve characters of the common Coldi alphabet appeared projected onto the table, just as the message on the screen completed.

I hear my son is in trouble. Like a typical Coldi, Nicha's father never wasted much time in greetings.

I replied using a fork, because my bandaged and taped-together fingers didn't allow the level of control I needed to touch the keys projected onto the table.

Trouble would be an overstatement.

I winced and cursed with every character. Was I ever glad Coldi had one character per syllable.

Send. Wait until the dot had stopped blinking.

I should have brought my tea. A person grew impatient waiting for communication to go through, even if that communication was beamed across the continent, up into space, through the Exchange network of anpar lines and halfway across the surface of another planet. Tea would be a great thing to have. I eyed the cup on the table, steaming in the glow from the bedside light. My eggs were getting cold, too.

But the reply came back quickly. *There is talk that blames Asto for this attack.*

I typed, *Allegations only*, but knew the damage had been done. Damn that movie.

It is because of these allegations that my son has been taken into custody?

I typed, *He is innocent and according to local law should be*

released soon.

Keeping all fingers and toes crossed of course, never mind that I couldn't manage that at the moment—whose stupid idea had it been to tape my fingers together?

The reply shot back, *How soon?*

Even though Nicha was *gamra* employed, I knew in one way or another he still worked for Asto. There was a word, *imayu*, that described the interpersonal networks. Within Asto society, the ties a person acquired during life were never severed, and their influence reached far. You and a partner, which could be a sibling, a friend or a business contact, reported to a superior, who was then paired with another who reported to their superior, and so on and so forth, all the way up. Nicha's father ranked frightfully high in Asto's air force. Through his father, Nicha's loyalty would be tied up to Ezhya Palayi himself. That was someone you definitely did *not* want to cross.

I typed, *I am investigating his release.*

Not mentioning that by Asto standards, I was relatively powerless to do so, but I did *not* want Asto involved in this. To them, democracy was an undesirable brand of activism. They had curious methods of justice. Writs served to perpetrators, who then had to respond within certain time or risk a retribution squad, often leading to assassination. Order and honouring *imayu* was more important than the life of an individual. They had plenty of individuals on Asto.

The answer blinked back, *When will he be released?*

Not, as I noted, outrage over the fact *that* Nicha had been detained. Guess it was part of what a military officer would call *hazards of the job*, but I didn't like it.

I typed, *Soon, I hope.*

Not wanting to say "this afternoon". Legally, the police couldn't hold Nicha for more than twenty-four hours in absence of a formal charge. Then again, who knew if that would apply to stateless *gamra* citizens. Nicha had lost his European passport in the

extraterrestrial citizenship case; he had been too disgusted to reapply and sit for the test the government said he needed to pass to be accepted in the country where he spent most of his adult life. And paid his taxes.

The reply shot back again, *Do you require help?*

I replied, equally fast, *Not yet.*

Indicating that help might well be called for in the future, the polite thing to do. But no, seeing “help” in Coldi terms would most likely involve soldiers with guns, I emphatically did *not* want help.

I typed, *The Exchange is looking into it.*

Or so I hoped.

Tell them I'm not impressed they've allowed this to happen.

I will convey that. I'm not impressed either. There were no untruths in that.

Thank you. I will leave it in your capable hands.

Like a true military person, he signed off without further comment. I hoped this meant disaster was temporarily averted. But, oh, someone needed to act quickly.

I dragged my comm unit over the table. The shortcut button connected to my office at the Exchange, but the junior administration assistant who answered said that the staff were in a meeting with Amarru. I could get her through the feeder network. I'm not repeating what I said then. If I caught the idiot who had made me hand in my feeder . . . The young man fell silent, possibly startled by my command of Coldi swear words—there were advantages to living with the son of a military officer. Then he said he'd leave messages.

I disconnected, stumbled to the other side of the table and started on my eggs. The toast had gone soggy. I shoved it aside and drank my tea, blowing steam off the surface.

In the street below, driverless buses splashed over their designated lanes in rain-slicked streets. A faint glow of light blue tinted the sky.

Two hours before start of business. I didn't know if I had that

much patience.

Meanwhile, I'd better look at the news. I logged onto my mail program. There were over three thousand messages, which I sorted alphabetically and scanned for familiar senders. Delia Murchison—the report you asked for. Delia again—addendum.

The history of Coldi involvement on Earth since 1961, the oldest record of Coldi presence in Athens, all secret of course, since the Coldi had only officially acknowledged their presence in 2094. Some *gamra* member entities had asked me to prepare this material, because they found it hard to accept that a world with such a large population had been isolated from *gamra* for so long and wanted to know how this had come about. There was an undertone of accusing the Coldi for keeping *gamra* away from Earth, but in light of what had happened, I wondered why I had ever thought this bickering within *gamra* important.

I shifted those messages in my work area and wondered if this meant Delia was no longer angry with me. That midnight call had been none too bright. Desperate. I realised I didn't function well without my *zhayma* either, at least not on an emotional level.

There were no official messages from Nations of Earth.

That was strange, because I would have expected some sort of statement from Vice President Sigobert Danziger.

So I created a message to Danziger instead.

I slipped the thought-sensor behind my ear and half-whispered, *Mr Vice President, I would appreciate if I could see you as soon as possible to clarify my position. I would also appreciate having my zhayma . . .* No, correct that. The offending word vanished. . . . *my assistant released as soon as possible.*

Send. Surely Danziger would already be at work in this crisis?

I stared at the screen and noticed a message from Eva. *Are you still coming today?*

Oh shit. I lunged across the table for my comm unit. Punched Eva's ID. It rang, and rang, and rang. I pictured her house, a large two-storey affair with a large hall and sweeping staircase. I could

almost see the comm central screen on the wall in the living room. Flashing, beeping. No one answered.

I tried Eva's personal unit. It was off. Not good. That meant she was angry and meant to make me feel guilty about yesterday. About fobbing her off, about forgetting to call her back.

It wasn't the first time she'd been angry with me, either. At times, I hated myself for being so obsessed with my work, but mostly I was too busy to worry about what Eva thought. That wasn't good either, but I swore when I settled in my position things would be different.

Right now I could almost hear Eva's voice. *Work, work, work, all you think about is work.*

Oh Eva. *Please Eva, don't make things any more difficult than they already are.*

I disconnected the call, drawing a deep breath. *Mahzu.* Negotiate. Picture yourself in the other person's shoes.

Eva was in love with a man who was about to leave for a place where she couldn't meet him, and talk to him only over the Exchange network, which she hadn't used much and which wasn't exactly private. A place unspeakably far away, where the previous person in that job had gone crazy and vanished without a word.

She would think, what if something happened to me? And no one she knew or trusted could go and find me? Only strange people with strange names who spoke strange languages.

Coldi society made distinctions between those who travelled and those who didn't, like the dichotomy that marked their society, two sides evening each other out. I was *ichi*, one who travelled, and she was *ata-ichi*, one who didn't. Balancing me. I shouldn't hold that against her. After all, I hadn't encouraged her to come. It could be dangerous, and she would be lonely in Barresh. I said I'd review the matter in six months' time, when I returned for my first report to the Nations of Earth assembly.

The Nations of Earth half of my contract might be for two years, but *gamra* appointed people for life, and I . . . let's just say I

had no intention to return here for an office job.

It would be up to me to make life in Barresh pleasant for her.

Flowers and chocolates it was, then.

I scrolled over the message, and hit reply *Yes. I'll come as soon as I can get out of here.* Definitely no promises about the time. In a job like mine, something always came up at the last minute.

Danziger finally replied a bit after midday, in a curt message, *Please see me at the office immediately.*

My mind flashed, *News about Sirkonen.*

I replied, *On my way.*

I grabbed my jacket and left the room, collecting my security in the corridor. They greeted me with serious faces. Very serious.

The two men must have slept in turns and bathed, because they looked fresh and smelled clean. They wore close-fitting trousers and jackets of a thick dark grey, not-quite-black material, not leather, not plastic but something smooth and soft. Open buttons at one of the men's chests revealed a glimpse of body armour. Both wore charge guns strapped in brackets at their upper arms. Two guns each, clearly visible. Great. Battle dress today.

A taxi already waited at the hotel entrance, a regular driverless vehicle.

One of the guards sat on the front bench, while I and the other guard took the back.

No one spoke as the car splashed through puddles, trundling in its predestined path painted in yellow on the road, following trams and buses. The guard next to me kept glancing over his shoulder. A tinny voice drifted from his earpiece. A red tram followed the taxi, but behind that was a white car.

I met the man's eyes. "*Mashara?* Are people following us?"

"Special Services," said the guard in the front seat with absolute certainty.

"Is *mashara* aware that my status requires special consideration

with Special Services?”

“*Mashara* advises not. Special Services have received our request for information.”

“Received but not replied?”

“Not replied,” the man repeated, meeting my eyes, stiff faced, prim and proper.

The taxi stopped at a crossing. I looked again—the white car waited a little distance back. I told myself not to worry. I was a witness to a major crime. Sure, Special Services were here to protect me and had better things to do than reply to poorly-worded questions from my inexperienced companions. If they wanted to spy on me, they’d have less conspicuous ways than following me like this. I still didn’t like it. No one had told me anything about protection.

The main gates to the Nations of Earth compound were closed. Police and Nations of Earth guards had set up shop at the entrance, where a crowd gathered under a sea of colourful umbrellas. As soon as the car stopped, the media sharks went into a feeding frenzy, flashing cameras, yelling questions.

I opened the window, showing the guards my Nations of Earth identity pass. I had to shout over the voices. “Cory Wilson to see Vice President Danziger.”

The guard studied my card for a moment, then glanced inside the car. His gaze rested on the Indrahui guard in the front seat.

“Excuse me, Mr Wilson.” He gestured for me to come out, and after I had done so, spoke in a low voice. “I don’t think *they* will be allowed inside.”

I nodded, although I began to like this attitude less and less. I bet that if I had come here with a private, Earthly-looking guard, I would not have had the same trouble. “I think they would be happy to wait—”

The front door of the taxi swung open and the guard rose from his seat. He was almost a head taller than the police officer, and in his tight outfit, skin dark as obsidian, wiry bronze hair in a tight

coil at the back of his head, he was truly imposing.

“We have orders. We protect the Delegate.” He spoke with a heavy accent, and the simplicity of the words lent them added menace.

The officer took a big step back, and almost tripped.

I switched to Coldi. “*Mashara*, please, there is no need—”

The guard turned to me, fixing me with moss-green eyes. Rain drizzled on both of us. He inclined his head, diamond-drops of water in his hair.

“With respect, Delegate, the events of yesterday have shown that there is a need.”

“I’ll be safe inside the gates. These men are police—”

“The Delegate must be protected at all times. Chief Delegate Akhtari’s orders.”

That was Chief Delegate Akhtari, leader of *gamra*. What did she have to do with this? Wait—was he suggesting that *gamra* thought that the attack had been aimed at *me*?

That was ridiculous. There would have been much better opportunities to kill me. Besides, my presence in Sirkonen’s office at the time of the explosion was coincidence and had been the result of a change in plans. On the other hand . . . there was no conspiracy regarding Kershaw’s disappearance. There was no *gamra* faction wanting to get rid of Sirkonen. To them, one president was the same as the next. If an Earth-based group had been responsible for this attack, they would have already grabbed the headlines; Flash Newspoint bought all stories, including those from criminals. Besides, if someone really, really wanted to derail the relationship between Earth and *gamra*, Sirkonen was entirely the wrong person to shoot.

The right person would be Cory Wilson.

My heart thudded hard against my ribs. The taxi’s horn was beeping—someone needed to feed it some credit. All around, cameras clicked and zoomed. Journalists jostled into position, yelling questions.

Why was I here?

Had I heard any news?

Why was I still going to Barresh?

Was it true that I was a Union citizen?

Why was I defending the Union's innocence?

The two Indrahui were watching me. Damn, the men might be young and have little experience, but they were right about coming inside. I *wanted* them with me. Look what had happened to the last man I had left to wait while I went into a meeting.

I faced the officer. "If you let me in, you'll have to let them in, too. They're my staff."

Not a shred of emotion crossed the serviceman's face as he consulted someone over his comm unit, and after a few minutes standing in the rain, listening to the crackle of a voice through the unit, the three of us were allowed to walk through.

A SMALL PERSONNEL carrier waited on the other side of the fence. The Indrahui with the sunglasses waited for me; the other followed right behind me. The man had to duck to avoid hitting his head on the ceiling.

I sat down on a rearward-facing bench, between the two obsidian figures, breathing the scent of raw onions that always hung around Indrahui people.

Nations of Earth guards faced us, their gazes anywhere but on me and my escort. One slid the door shut, enclosing us in a cocoon of uncomfortable silence. I and my very non-Earthly staff on one side, Nations of Earth military facing us, eyeing one another.

I shivered and wished I'd taken a second treatment capsule that morning. My body was being prepared for life in a hot place. My skin blocked all warmth from sunlight, while enlarged blood vessels in places like the underside of my arms and inside my nostrils lost more heat than normal. My core temperature had risen to 40.5 degrees; I'd measured it this morning. In a miserable place like this, I needed medication to keep my temperature down and stop myself shivering.

The van crawled along the leafy lane that was Central Avenue; the pavilions glided by. European, North American, South American, African: each building held the offices of countries that were members of Nations of Earth, who had representatives in the assembly over there in that nouveau-antique building on the left hand side of the road.

Once, what almost seemed a lifetime ago, I had been a little boy who had lived here in the Nations of Earth compound. I'd gone to school and played on those lawns as a kid, while my father was the diplomat. Somehow, life had seemed careless then, even though the world had just come out of a series of devastating wars, which had resulted in total anarchy, and Nations of Earth was only a few years old. Food, electricity and water vouchers had been just a fact of life; I didn't know better.

Those memories belonged to a different world. I had played with *gamra* children; they occasionally came to our school. They had lots of weird gadgets, heaven to us kids who had only heard of the glorious time of the previous century. They spoke with strange accents and had funny ideas about sharing. But none of us eight-year-olds thought any less of them, even though many of our parents did. Not my father; he had met my stepmother here, a tall and striking Damarcian whose tiger-eyes and long spidery index and middle fingers freaked everyone out.

The van came to a halt in front of the president's office. The marble steps seemed grey today, and droplets sprouting from the memorial fountain formed a mist in the autumn air.

At least twenty servicemen stood outside the building.

The van doors slid open and one of my guards stepped out as per security protocol. Someone shouted and several Nations of Earth men sprang forward. Special Services Branch, all of them.

As one, the Indrahui guards jumped to shield me, reaching for the guns in their arm brackets with well-practiced speed.

I shouted, "Wait!"

A tense silence.

A circle of servicemen in Nations of Earth uniform surrounded us.

"With respect, *mashara*." I pushed myself between the two men, heart thudding. The odd scent of their skin wafted past. "There is no need for heightened attention here. These men protect the *president*."

Neither man shifted. “*Mashara* protects the delegate.” Solemn, absolutely, those young faces, one hundred percent serious.

How severely had Chief Delegate Akhtari admonished them for losing sight of me yesterday?

I switched to Isla. “These men are my personal security.”

An officer with a few badges on his chest made a gesture. Uniformed men stepped back. Arms relaxed. Hands withdrew from belts.

“Sorry, sir. Follow me please, sir,” one of the servicemen said

The other servicemen lined up on the stairs. No one made the slightest sound. Nervous as hell. The servicemen had probably received a severe talking-to as well. How could anyone have slipped past the ridiculous security and hit right at the heart of Nations of Earth?

I followed the senior officer into the building. Police and other investigators still hung around in the hall, behind spider webs of bright orange tape that blocked the stairs to Sirkonen’s office.

We turned into the ground floor corridor instead, where the officer led us into what looked like the pressroom—rows of chairs faced a dais against the far wall.

A large 3D screen took up most of the wall behind the dais, and it projected a scene that startled me: a live screening from the hospital, an image so real the screen might have been a window.

Alone in a white room stood a bed, a number of chairs arranged around it, all of them occupied. There was a grey-haired woman dressed in wildly unseasonable furs. Sirkonen’s sister, who I’d read lived in a remote Finnish village inside the Arctic Circle. Two younger blond-haired women also sat there, one feeding a baby. A lanky young man with shoulder-length blond hair had to be Sirkonen’s son, Michael. He was an artist, I remembered. A bit of a black sheep in the family, but as far as I knew the only one of Sirkonen’s family who lived locally. Sirkonen’s wife, or his former wife rather, wasn’t there.

As for the figure in the bed, unrecognisably bandaged and tied

up to tubes and blinking machines, it might have been anyone. There was no movement, no indication even that this was indeed Sirkonen.

My knees grew weak with painful memories. The smell of disinfectant, the oppressive silence of the palliative care ward. Six beds in the room, three on each side. My mother in the bed over by the window. Five other beds with silent, hollow-eyed people hooked up to blinking equipment. There was the hissing of a burning match, and on a table behind me, a nurse was lighting candles. Seven. Then they were singing, but all I could see was the wrapped present on the bedspread, the present with the purple ribbon my mother's hands were too weak to hold. I touched those hands for the last time a few weeks later, when they were still and cold.

"This way Mr Wilson."

Deep breath, and another one. Ghosts of the past dissolved.

Two Nations of Earth security guards with their red-collared shirts stood at a door in the far corner of the room. The officer informed me that the Indrahui guards had to stay here.

I gave them a small nod. *It's fine*. They settled, uneasily, in the front row of seats.

I passed the guards into the next room, which, with the portraits on the walls of twenty-five years' worth of Nations of Earth dignitaries, looked like the official interview studio.

On an antique velvet-covered couch sat Sigobert Danziger, vice president of Nations of Earth. He had made this corner into an office, with his reader on a low table before him. He was talking on his comm unit with one hand while the other hung in a sling across his chest. One look at me, and he broke off his call.

Whoever Danziger had been talking to, I bet I had been the subject of the discussion.

I strolled to the corner, pretending innocence. "Sir, you were injured as well?"

I hadn't even known Danziger had been anywhere near

President Sirkonen's office.

Danziger nodded briefly, thin lips pursed.

"My office is underneath the president's. Some ceiling material came down."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

I sat down on the armchair opposite him while silence lingered. As was normal for him, his shirt hung off his bony shoulders like a poorly erected tent and a belt held up trousers at least a hand's span too wide. Jokes went around the corridors of Nations of Earth that any staffer who made suggestions about the state of his attire found him or herself on the to-be-replaced list faster than one could say *tailor-made suits*.

The pale fluorescent light was most unkind to his face, showing bags under his eyes and a landscape of wrinkles and moles that would make a toad proud.

Danziger pushed his reader across the table with his unbandaged arm. "Read that, Mr Wilson." He exuded as much friendliness as a pickled herring.

The screen displayed a message from Sirkonen's head of security, emblazoned with a *top-secret* watermark and the words *for the president only*.

So far, preliminary investigations have failed to turn up evidence of explosives or projectiles in the president's office. We have examined a great number of glass fragments, some of them molten. This concurs with our suspicion that a massive burst of heat went through the window, causing it to shatter. A woman walking her dog outside the compound gates spoke of a red flash of light. An appeal for witnesses has brought up the same reports. A delivery driver says he was almost blinded by a similar flash when he was about to pull away from a parking spot. Other witnesses saw red flashes and speak specifically of seeing objects outlined in a red aura. We have mapped all the witness localities, and they form a circle, of which the President's office is the dead centre. . . .

I stared at the screen, heart thudding. I'd seen that red aura,

too. And dismissed it as something brought on by extreme fatigue.

Danziger's face twitched. "Well, what do you think, Mr Wilson?"

It was not a question; it was a challenge, a *Denounce aliens or give me an explanation* type of challenge.

"This is the outcome of the investigation?" Buying time, surely. What to say? This wasn't Earth technology, no way. Had the journalists known?

Danziger snorted. "Those results will be at least a week and this information won't be in it. This information is not to leave this room. Understand?"

I nodded.

"I want your opinion. *You* are supposed to know about these weird things."

These weird things meaning *gamra* matters. Various factions within *gamra*, which I knew about. Weapons, and where on Earth they could be, which I didn't. Asto-produced charge guns, like the guards carried, emitted a blue flash when triggered, not a red one, and none did so in wide circles surrounding their targets.

"I have no knowledge that anyone within *gamra* has a problem with Sirkonen's tenure of office."

"Indeed." Spoken with great sarcasm.

A rush of blood went to my cheeks. Was I under suspicion now? Of not telling the truth? "Not with the information I have, sir. I know of no single faction likely to mount such an attack."

"Indeed," Danziger said again, and looked at the screen of his reader.

Frustration boiled. "Sir, if you have any information other than what I have, please share it. I can only comment on what I know."

Danziger said nothing. He reached for the reader with his free arm and shut down the message. So—it was all bluff.

"Sir, security detained my *zhayma* without reason."

"The man you refer to was the only Union official within shooting distance of the president's office. The explosive was

Union-based technology. Naturally, he is a suspect.”

Naturally? “He is my direct assistant. I’ve lived with him for four years. This man is vitally important to my success in Barresh. *Gamra* will not stand for unwarranted arrests.”

A sharp, grey-eyed look, a blink of almost hairless eyelids. He said again, “Indeed.” And then, “You make it sound like a threat.”

“I assure you, sir, I’m not making a threat, but there will be one unless *gamra* gets an explanation.” Nicha’s father would make sure of that.

Danziger’s eyebrows flicked up. “And they would interfere in *our* system of justice?”

“No, but they’ll want to have him freed.” Or if he left it too long, come in with guns blazing.

“Freed? Mr Wilson, you don’t seem to understand or for some reason it’s not getting through to you: there were *Union* weapons involved.”

“Yes. And within *gamra* there are hundreds, maybe thousands of factions, some very small. Isn’t it an overreaction to blame the possible—and I mean *possible*—actions of one person on the entire organisation? That is if those weapons haven’t fallen into the hands of some very ordinary humans. May I remind you of the Kazakhstan case?”

“Union have not formally denied the attack.”

“No, and they won’t until you make a formal accusation. However, detaining Nicha Palayi without charges won’t have put them in a good mood.” If I sounded sarcastic, that was exactly what I intended. Nations of Earth had employed and sponsored me to vet their responses for anything that might cause unnecessary offense. So instead Danziger ignored my knowledge. That brought home how much they thought of me. A secretary with quaint habits and an unnatural desire for self-destruction, Eva’s father called me. He was probably joking only half the time. I wasn’t one of the old boys, diplomats who all went to school with each other; I never had been.

“I doubt if these people were ever in a good mood, Mr Wilson. They’ve come here to conquer, not to cooperate. Their rigid social structure brooks no argument. I’m sure you’re aware of the saying *If it doesn’t beat you, you can’t defeat it, you can’t fuck it, then you must kill it.*”

I’d heard rumours that Danziger was anti-*gamra*. I suspected it simply because Eva’s father adored the man, but this, the crudest of things said about the Coldi, was . . . worse than calling them ethies or chans, or aliens. It was . . . damn, I was speechless.

“You haven’t heard that one?” He raised one eyebrow.

“I hardly think it’s appropriate. It’s a purely biological reaction for Coldi to establish dominance of one of the parties in a relationship—”

“Dominance—exactly, that’s why we can’t deal with them—”

“—a reaction that’s rarely exhibited with people not their own species—” Although Nicha had reacted to me.

“—they fight for the top spot like rabid wolves, and then they tell us *religion* is primitive?”

Right. I didn’t, *didn’t* want to go there.

Danziger met my eyes for a few long seconds, then looked at the screen of the reader still on the table.

I breathed in and out to regain my calm, my *mahzu*. “Sir, we’re talking about *gamra* here, not about Coldi peculiarities. *Gamra* is an over-arching organisation. It only deals with the Exchange. I’m not prepared to let a small group of extremists hijack our efforts towards cooperation. It makes little difference if these extremists are Earth-based or *gamra*-based. If we withdraw from the process, these people will have just what they want.”

Danziger nodded, as if to himself. “Well, then. You are lucky that the majority of Nations of Earth supports your candidature, including our incapacitated president. I also think you should know that I have the right to veto your departure.”

“And I advise you against exercising it, sir. I think it would be very unwise to cut off dialogue with *gamra*, *especially* in a case like

this.” Just what the fuck was he getting at?

Danziger laughed. “I see. Then you might tell me your view on this, Mr Wilson: what advantage is there for us to associate ourselves with them? Why should we clamour to join them? So that we can travel freely? We can’t anyway, with the prices their Exchange charges. An institution, I must add, that has a monopoly on interstellar travel. Why should we invest a lot of money on building interfacing equipment just so that the rich can zip from one corner of the galaxy to the other and bring back weird souvenirs, for which, I might add, too, we will need to put into place an entire quarantine operation so we don’t import some sort of disease? What’s the benefit in that for the countries of Nations of Earth? Why shouldn’t we, and I quote something a tradesman said to me recently, ‘Tell the lot of them to go to hell?’ We have enough problems of our own making. We don’t need theirs.”

A thousand thoughts went through my mind. Arguments, most of them idealistic, such as *because it’s the only way forward*. But such arguments held little water with a practical person like Danziger, and the trouble was I agreed with at least some of Danziger’s points, especially with travel being restricted to the elite; it was extremely expensive. “Because, sir, whether we join or not, *gamra* people will continue to come here; and without agreement with *gamra*, we cannot stop them at the Exchange. We can only rely on the first line of defence around Athens, and the second at the Greek borders, both inadequate and incomplete as history has proven. What is more, without laws, we are powerless to stop their illegal trade—such as the trade of arms. If we do not fall under their laws, that gives these people license to conduct criminal activities.”

“Such as attacking our office. We come full circle.” Danziger chuckled. “Mr Wilson, I heard you won the Taurus debating competition in high school. I capitulate.”

Danziger leaned back in his seat. He seemed to be enjoying himself. I, though, was beginning to feel more and more like a

goldfish in a bowl. *Look, here is our young diplomat, let's throw him in a vat of boiling water and see how high he jumps.*

Shit.

Why didn't Danziger come to the point? But the point was that he didn't seem to have a point, just a handful of half-threats he couldn't carry out without approval of the executive council, who were all appointed by Sirkonen. Yes, his point seemed to be *do as I say or you may well find yourself without a job*. A threat he couldn't make true while Sirkonen held the presidency.

Danziger nodded. "It's good that I have such excellent advisors, then. I wish you good luck, Mr Wilson, in your new job."

"Thank you." Stiff-faced as hell.

I rose, gave Danziger a polite nod. By the time I left the room, he had already gone back to his reader.

On the large 3D screen, Sirkonen's family sat around a projection of an X-ray while a doctor talked and pointed. Tears tracked down one of Sirkonen's daughters' cheeks.

In the room behind me, Danziger worked, possibly a few heartbeats away from the presidency.

What a mess.

WHEN I LEFT the building, flanked by the two guards, I was still dissecting all the posturing and contradictory statements Danziger had made, and deciding how seriously I needed to take them and what he had actually tried to tell me.

Danziger had come up through the ranks of humanitarian aid agencies that had grown into state-like power in the food and water wars of the Asian subcontinent and Africa. A true Earth politician. Part German, part Argentinean. Never had much to do with the off-Earth section of humanity, the New Colonists who lived on Moon and Mars bases, or on Taurus, let alone with the extraterrestrial humanoids of *gamra*. Did he have the knowledge and backing to deal with this, now that the presidency had been thrust upon him? In the current situation, with food rationing still a reality in many parts of the world, and pockets of violence lingering from the oil wars, the relationship with *gamra* was not a priority and they wanted to be sure *gamra* got that message. I understood that. It was probably why Sirkonen had given the job to me, rather than one of his cronies. The tiny New Colonist off-Earth human population, mostly intelligent and influential people, had long been unhappy about having no say in Earth politics. Sirkonen had appointed their golden boy—me, in possession of several nice decorative awards—to appease them. I had no illusions about that either.

But now Danziger was forced to deal with *gamra*, and the relationship had suddenly become important. He knew little about

it, and needed a good advisor. I didn't think I had ever impressed him. He might well want to replace me with one of his retired heavyweights. And damn it, I hadn't gone through all this study to be some politician's paperboy.

It was still raining when I braved the bear-pit of journalists outside the gates. Behind the multi-hued sea of umbrellas, the waiting taxi stood like a lighthouse.

I was alone, more alone than I'd been for the past four years. Normally, I would have conferred with Nicha through the feeder. *Keep smiling or you first*, that sort of thing. And he would have been there, a warm steadying presence next to me. *Rimoyu*, balance, *imayu*, the loyalty network; they weren't instincts for me, but I'd come to rely on the social structure they afforded.

But my head echoed with emptiness and the wind pelted freezing drizzle at exposed parts of my too-hot skin.

I pulled my jacket over my head to avoid the rain and questions, but both came anyway.

How was the president?

Any word from Barresh as to who claimed responsibility?

When was the press going to be informed?

I wished I could answer those questions, or at least answer them positively. Tell them that the president would make a speedy and full recovery and would be back at work in no time. Instead, my guards cleared a path through the crowd, gaining me more questions.

Why was I still considering leaving?

Did this mean the handover had been signed?

How could I even consider leaving seeing as the Union was clearly responsible?

Whose side was I on anyway?

One of the guards opened the door to the taxi, oh so inviting. But before I could get in, someone pushed a card under my nose. *Melissa Hayworth, Chief Reporter, Flash Newspoint.*

I glared at her.

“You seem to be under a lot of pressure, Mr Wilson.” Her hair, plastered against her forehead, dripped water into her face.

“No thanks to you.”

“The people have a right to know what happened. We live in a free world, no matter how much Nations of Earth and *gamra* would like us to forget that.”

She said *gamra* and not Union. “Look, Ms Hayworth, it’s out of my hands. I told the police what I saw, and the matter is with them.”

“So you’re going?”

“Yes.” Never mind what I would do if Nicha didn’t come back before tomorrow morning; that was none of her business.

A brief silence. Not a flicker of emotion crossed her face. She looked at where I held the top of the taxi’s door. “How are your hands?”

“Fine.”

Her dark gaze slid to my jacket, and rested on the blood-stained pocket. “You don’t look fine, Mr Wilson.”

“I’m only tired.” Bloody exhausted in fact.

She lowered her voice. “You can talk to me. I know what it’s like.”

“I’m fine, really. Thank you for your concern.” What did she mean *I know what it’s like*? What was this woman trying to do, asking me about my health? “Ms Hayworth, please let me get into the taxi. I have an appointment.”

I expected a snide remark or more questioning, but neither came.

“Very well.” She stepped back and gestured at the card. “If ever you feel like telling the truth behind this, don’t hesitate to contact me.” She tapped her shoulder where a nifty plastic cap covered the microphone of the reader she carried on her belt.

“Miss Hayworth, I will certainly not forget that.” I fumbled the card into my pocket, trying not to wince, and slipped into the back seat of the taxi, next to the guard with the sunglasses. He had

pulled up his knees sideways so he fitted between the seats. The other guard shut the door behind me, and clambered in the front seat.

I gave the onboard computer Eva's address and told it to stop at a flower shop along the way, instructions I had to repeat, of course. The guard next to me raised his eyebrows. "Flowers, Delegate?"

"On this world, and this culture, when one visits a woman, it is the custom to bring flowers." And despite so much of their former country being under water, the Dutch still did flowers very well.

Goodness knew what Indrahui did with flowers—ate them, probably. Hunger was a constant companion of common people on Indrahui as their leaders fought over which piece of land belonged to which ethnic group.

I fished my comm unit from my pocket and pressed the one-button shortcut to my office in Athens, wincing as pain spiked through my palms. Ouch, ouch and ouch. The bandage itched, my fingers felt hot and the skin pulled when I moved.

The call was answered quickly by Sheyna, who I jokingly called mail boy and who looked after the correspondence.

I switched to Coldi. "Is Amarru there?"

"Sure." There were some clicks.

"Cory, how are you?" My mind flooded with relief at the familiar Coldi voice, too deep to be a woman's, too high to be a man's.

"I'm fine. I lost my feeder."

"I noticed that—"

"When is Nicha going to be freed? No one is talking to me here."

"Cory. I think we need to tread carefully."

"What do you mean? Has Nicha told you anything?"

"I haven't spoken to Nicha."

Shit. "You haven't spoken to him? At all? The police told me he was entitled to one call and that he had already made it. I thought . . ."

Who had he contacted? Nicha's mother no longer lived in London; Nicha didn't have a girlfriend . . . who was I missing?

"I don't believe he's been allowed to contact anyone. Only this morning I managed to speak to the *police* officer in charge of prisons. Not a cooperative fellow. I'm waiting for him to contact me back. He says he can't do anything without Nations of Earth approval."

I glanced at the clock. At a quarter past four, there were three quarters of an hour left in the working day; nothing was going to happen today. Someone was stalling. And all the time I'd thought the Exchange was working on something—I'd even had the disgrace to feel miffed that Nicha hadn't called me. And all that time, Nicha had been alone, going crazy. . . .

"I *have* to see him."

"I don't think that would be a good idea."

"Why not? Amarru, he's—"

"Can't talk about that right now."

What the fuck was going on? "Then can you at least get a lawyer onto this?"

"We already have. I've just been talking to Nixie Chan. She's outraged and is more than happy to help."

"Good." Although frankly I would have preferred someone less loud and flamboyant, someone less likely to stir already-frayed emotions.

Something beeped in the background of Amarru's office.

"Oh, that might be her. Cory, are you online the rest of the day?"

"Yes. I'll be visiting Eva, but . . ." Dratted dinner party. As usual, Eva came last. To my horror, we had already arrived in the suburb where she lived.

"All right, I'll ping you when we know more."

I closed the connection and scrambled for Danziger's ID on the reader. I might just have time to call him. Danziger's secretary answered, saying the vice president was in a meeting. I begged her

to send her boss an urgent message. *Nixie Chan has just been assigned as Nicha Palayi's lawyer. Please contact me as soon as possible.*

The guard next to me met my eyes. An earpiece with a tiny microphone dangled at his ear. He said, "The white car follows again."

I looked over my shoulder, but saw at least four white cars, two of them taxis trundling behind us, the other two minibuses.

The guard in the front seat muttered, in Indrahui, "I'll be glad when we're out of here."

I wasn't sure if he realised I understood.

Eva's house. A two-storey affair with a straw roof, bay windows, mock-historic woodwork and a white picket fence before a smattering of neatly-clipped but bedraggled roses. As it was October, the leaves were turning yellow, and red rosehips floated like little bits of colour, a pale memory of the splendour of the garden in summer. A few sad asters bloomed purple under the living room window, but the rest of the garden bathed in yellows and browns—preparing for winter. Next time I came here it would be summer.

The door to the house swung open and there stood Eva, in a shimmering green gown with bows and ruffles and collars edged in white lace. Her hair, a mass of dark curls, had been pinned on her head in mock-Victorian style.

She rushed out, her shoes clacking on the steps, meeting me halfway down the porch.

"Oh, Cory!"

I whisked the flowers out of the way of her whirlwind embrace. She smelled of roses. Loose strands of curls tickled my face.

"Cory, oh Cory. I heard about it yesterday. I was so scared." She was crying.

At the sound of her familiar Polish accent, the heavy cloak of

tension slipped from my shoulders. I buried my face in her curls, brushing my lips over the skin of her neck. I wanted to kiss her, and for once not care about the excessive prudishness that swept through the upper echelons of the diplomatic corps. *Everyone is always watching. Do nothing that could discredit you.* How I regretted that attitude. If only she would come to the hotel with me.

I handed her the flowers. "I'm sorry I couldn't come earlier."

Eva smiled through her tears, all glittering eyes and white teeth. "Oh Cory . . . they're beautiful." She gingerly touched the bandage on my right hand. "What happened to your hands?"

"I fell on glass."

"Does it hurt—" Her eyes widened. "Who are *they*?"

Both guards stood at the gate, studying the house as if deliberately avoiding looking at us. Indrahui did not show this type of affection in public. "*Gamra* sent two bodyguards."

Eva's frown deepened. "For you?"

"Yes. I'm a *gamra* delegate now, remember?" My attempt at an upbeat tone fell flat. I didn't even feel optimistic myself. I began to think that I, too, would be more at ease once I had left.

Eva's throat worked. "Is that because you. . . ? You know they say *gamra* are responsible for the attack on the president?"

The gaping hole of insecurity inside me grew. "A lot is being said right now. Most of it is nonsense."

Eva nodded, said nothing about what she believed; and, somehow, I really wanted to know. Was she taken in by the media hype? Was she curious about what had really happened? She studied international politics. What did she think?

There was no time to discuss. The curtains at the bay window stirred. Hidden by folds of gauze, her parents would be watching.

"Do those men . . . come in?"

I could see her brain working. They hadn't catered for two extra mouths; she wasn't sure what they ate. *Gamra* people was a sore subject with her father anyway—

"Eva, you don't need to feed them. They're professional

bodyguards. They can look after themselves.”

A tiny frown crossed her face. “In the rain?”

I flooded with warmth. Eva cared; yes, she would get used to living in Barresh. She might be scared and bewildered at first, but she would be fine.

“I’ll let them come into the kitchen. At least it’s dry and warm there.”

“I’m sure they’ll appreciate that. —*Mashara*.”

The men came up the path, meeting me like glistening obsidian statues come to life.

“This is a private gathering for me; there is no risk to my person here. I would appreciate—for the sake of my host—if *mashara* would not come into the room with me. The lady says there is a place to wait, out of the rain.” Never mind what the Polish cook would feel about this extraterrestrial invasion of his domain.

The guard with the sunglasses said, “This is the personal residence of Nations of Earth ambassador of Poland, Zbrowsky?”

I nodded. “I’m contracted to his daughter.” Not the same as engaged, but close enough.

“*Mashara* advises caution with the ambassador.” So, they’d worked out that Eva’s father was a supporter of Danziger’s. Not bad at all.

“Don’t worry. Really, *mashara*, this place is my second home.” Was that a slight flick of the eyebrows I saw? “The lady invites you in. I suspect you’d appreciate waiting some place dry.”

Mind your pronouns, Delegate.

Faces impassive, the men bowed to Eva, and she blushed. “Oh, aren’t they just gorgeous?”

I hissed a whisper, “Eva, they understand Isla.”

“Oh.” Her cheeks grew even redder.

I followed Eva into the house, the two men walking a step or two behind. I was cold. Nervous. Not in the mood for pomp and ceremony. Realised that what I wanted most right now was

privacy. Just me and her in a nice little restaurant, talking about—well—us, without half the world listening in. But of course that was out of the question.

Into the hall. The floor, the walls, the curving staircase all glared white with artificial marble. A chandelier hung from the ceiling, some grotesque bird's nest of glitters and dangles. Palms grew in brass pots on either side of the living room door. Smells drifted from the kitchen, at the end of the corridor that led off the hall.

I glanced at the dark cavity at the top of the staircase. Eva's room was up there, although I had seen it only twice, and she had been too nervous to enjoy the kiss I had thought to steal in the privacy of lace curtains, down-filled bedcovers and ruffled pillows. A good Catholic girl did not take her boyfriend to her room. Anyone in a position of note, who possessed a contract for the intent of marriage, did not misbehave for fear it might be used against them—mainly by news services like Flash.

"Oh, poor Cory." Eva's mother had come to the door of the living room, dowager hips straining at her green velvet dress.

She enfolded me in a hug heavy with perfume. Her lips smacked the air, just missing my cheeks. "Come inside, you poor thing. We were waiting for you."

At that moment, my comm unit beeped. Wincing, I fished it out of my pocket and recognised the ID by the time I had managed to attach the earpiece to my ear. Ouch—damn those bandages. "Delia?"

It wasn't Delia, but her secretary: Delia wanted to see me tomorrow morning. I started to protest that I was leaving tomorrow morning, but caught Eva's dagger glance.

I ended the conversation quickly, but had barely taken two steps before the unit beeped again. Some unknown ID. Local. Nixie Chan, I guessed.

A dainty hand closed over the comm unit, and Eva's brown eyes met mine. "No. You're not bringing that thing inside. Turn it off."

“But this is important. Nicha . . .” I tried to free the unit without hurting my hands too much.

“You are about to leave for six months, and I don’t want to share you with Nicha. Just for dinner, one evening. Nicha is not going to run away.”

I met her eyes, wordless, while the unit still emitted muffled beeps. No, Nicha was definitely not going to run away since he was in jail, and in case she hadn’t noticed, he was innocent. Nicha was my *zhayma*. Nicha was my work, and my work was my life. Nicha was more important than . . .

Than Eva?

I sighed, cut off the beeping and unclipped the earpiece. All right, I’d have dinner with the family without electronic interruption, but I was *not* switching the unit off altogether. I called, “*Mashara*.”

The closest guard took the unit from me.

I said, in Coldi, “Please answer any calls. Come and get me if it is vitally important.”

The man nodded and retreated towards the hall.

It was warm in the living room, with a scent of cigar smoke as a blue mist in the air. A fire blazed in the hearth and the big dining table, with a pristine white tablecloth and delicate antique chairs, was set with gold-rimmed plates of two sizes, long-stemmed wine glasses, serviettes and finger bowls; the diplomats loved their mock-Victorian style and manners.

Eva’s father stood staring out the window, hands clasped behind his back. When I came in, he held out his hand, but grinned sheepishly when his gaze fell on my bandaged palms. “I guess I shall not shake your hand today.”

A thin man, from whom Eva had inherited her sharp nose, he wore his hair and beard cropped short, both now more grey than brown. His eyebrows, long and bushy, had been fashioned into two tufts that stood out from his forehead like a billygoat’s horns. A smile wrinkled the skin around his eyes. “I heard you got caught

up in a bit of trouble.” His accent was not as heavy as Eva’s mother’s.

“Just a bit,” I said and we laughed. As ambassador for Poland, Eva’s father would know all there was to know. He had probably spent all day talking about it.

He asked, “Any news about the president?”

I shook my head. “Sadly, no.”

He heaved a sigh and we let the worry hang unspoken between us. “Drink?”

“Sure.” One did not refuse a Polish host’s liquor. But oh, I had trouble keeping my eyes open in this stuffy room all of a sudden.

“Sit down,” he said, gesturing at the velvet-covered couch.

“Thank you, but I think I’ll stand for a bit, or I’ll fall asleep.” I went to the window and looked into the sad remains of the garden. An electric bus rumbled through the street. I wondered where that white car was. “Foul weather.”

“Yes.” Eva’s father opened the door to the cabinet next to the hearth. “Will be a lot better where you’re going, I bet.”

“Don’t know that I’d call it better.” Barresh was hot and muggy, but I loved its violent monsoonal storms, with winds that ripped millions of petals off the trees that grew everywhere on the islands and whirled them about like pink clouds. I could almost smell the ever-present scent of hot springs—rotten eggs, some said, but for me, the smell signified relaxation in one of the many public baths. Me and Nicha, and some strange fruity drinks.

“Oh, Dad, don’t talk like that.” Eva had come up behind me, her warmth and perfume radiating from her. “I want tonight to be fun, so don’t you talk about leaving all the time.”

I stroked her cheek with my thumb, staring at her moist lips. “Don’t worry. I’ll talk about whatever you want.” Oh, how I wanted to kiss her. Somehow, I would have to get a few private moments tonight.

Her father pulled a bottle out of the cupboard and put it on the table. Clear fluid sloshed behind a white and red label. I cringed.

Not the Sliwowica—that stuff was seventy percent alcohol and I was one hundred percent jet-lagged and didn't think that would make a happy combination.

Eva's father again bent into the cupboard, then turned to Eva and said something in Polish about there not being enough glasses.

Eva started across the room, but her father called her back. He said something else in an even lower voice, also in Polish, but I picked up the word *chans*, accompanied by a glance towards the hall.

Eva's eyes met mine before she opened the door, and I hated the apology that hovered in them. She didn't need to apologise for her father's opinions. Like so many of the older generation, he was so afraid of everything to do with *gamra*, he didn't know how to use the word properly. The derogatory term "chans" had come about when Coldi on Earth disguised themselves as Chinese and had used the last name Chan so much that real Chinese people with that name had scrambled over themselves to change their name to Chen or Chang. My guards weren't chans.

The fire popped in the silence Eva left behind.

I decided to bury the issue by facing it. "I'm sorry to inconvenience you by bringing the two men here. They're my assigned bodyguard."

The horned eyebrows rose. "Nations of Earth security doesn't assign you a guard, after what you've witnessed?"

"They *are* my guard. Half my contract is paid by *gamra*."

Eva's father snorted. "Lunacy. The entire world is turned upside down by this cowardly attack. You should stay here until the emergency council has come out of their meeting and has advised the general assembly tomorrow."

Oh. Fucking. Hell. The emergency council was sitting. That's why I couldn't get onto Danziger.

Fuck. Heat rose to my cheeks as I stared unseeingly out the window.

I should have been invited. Wasn't that why they were paying me

—to act as mediator? Who else currently in Rotterdam could put forward the *gamra* position, the position of the accused?

I brought my hand to my pocket, remembered I'd given my comm unit to the guards, and then just stared, speechless. Even my ears glowed with anger. Damn it—damn it!

Eva's father was still talking. "... The whole situation is not stable and I don't think Danziger should have acted without approval of the emergency council."

"I am a mediator. I do not thoughtlessly abide by what Nations of Earth says. It is my task to help solve difficult situations, not perpetuate them." My reply came out far too sharp, but oh damn it, I was angry. Was Danziger already shunting me aside?

"You would be advised to adhere to the emergency council resolutions."

"The emergency council does not dictate my actions." The president did, and Chief Delegate Akhtari—all the conditions were spelled out in a long document that had been picked apart and rewritten so many times that I might as well have stamped it on my forehead. And now they'd thrown out all those negotiations and done their own thing without my involvement.

"Then it should. After this ... this talk of conspiracies in Barresh—"

"It's a movie!"

"There is plenty of truth in it. Danziger should ask for an explanation of what happened to Kershaw—"

"There was an explanation. Twenty pages of it, circulated to all Nations of Earth delegates." He would have seen it, too.

"Hmph. We are meant to believe what they said without being able to check for ourselves? No, it tells me that they aren't playing honest. Isn't it telling that someone from the Union has found the supposed fake allegations in the movie close enough to the truth to take revenge?"

"That's not true." My voice was much more heated than he deserved.

“Prove it, prove it!” Eva’s father banged his hand on the table with each word. The plates rattled.

“I will, if I’m allowed to do my job.”

Eva’s mother interrupted. “Stop it, stop it, with the crazy politics.”

Her husband glared at her in the tense silence.

I sank down on the springy cushions of the couch, wincing when my hands touched the armrests. Normally, I liked discussing politics with Eva’s father, but today’s issue had lost its appeal.

Eva came back with the glasses. Her father poured and handed out the drinks, still in relative silence.

Eva settled on the couch next to me. “Are you tired?”

Exhausted. I’d lie down and fall asleep immediately. “When I’m with you, I’m never tired.” I kissed her forehead.

“I know. You just keep going and going.”

Her father said, “That’s the good thing about you. With a lot of hard work, maybe one day you’ll come to your senses.” *Your senses* being his side of politics. And that, accompanied with a bittersweet smile, was as much of a compliment as I was ever going to get from him. Strangely, I liked the man; he was always true to his word and his principles.

I smiled at Eva. “I have to rest some time.”

How much would I give to do it next to her, to watch the news together and talk about it without her father’s opinions, to drink a glass of wine, to peel off that dress. . . . I kissed her again, softly, on her nose.

Eva’s father cleared his throat and raised his glass. “Well, let’s just say: to the start of your job.”

Eva clinked her glass against mine. Her eyes glittered. Oft-spoken words of worry passed unspoken between us.

As the tiny sip I had taken burned its way down my throat, Eva’s mother said, “We have news, too.” Her tone was laden with meaning.

Eva straightened, her hands jammed between her knees.

Her mother breathed in self-importantly. “Eva will graduate when you come back.”

“She will . . .” I met Eva’s eyes, brimming with tears.

She nodded. “Isn’t it wonderful?”

“Yes, it is. I thought you wouldn’t be finished until next year.”

“So did I, but I’ve heard I can do both Global Economics and International Law in the next semester. It will be really busy, but you’re not going to be here, so I thought . . . Isn’t it great, Cory?” In her eyes lay the words she didn’t say: *Now we can get married.*

I stared at her. With the alcohol and the lack of sleep, my head felt even woollier than before. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to marry Eva—there was no question about that; I had signed the official intent. There was nothing barring us. We both had White permits, and Eva had passed her genetic test. I had stressed that my mother had died of a non-hereditary cancer, waving a declaration signed by my father four years ago. I remembered that visit to Lunar base, where he worked back then. His mouth had been twitching when he read through the document, and he’d mumbled things like, *We don’t know that it was non-hereditary . . . and What is Earth coming to? This is the biggest load of moondust I’ve ever seen . . . and, Well, son, if you think it will get them off your back . . .* Then he had scrawled his signature on the pad, and impressed his ID.

He’d returned the reader to me and said, *I guess you really love the girl.*

And I did. It was just that, at the moment, with all this mess, with Nicha locked up and me unsure what was happening, a wedding was the last thing on my mind. So soon, so definite. I swallowed. “So . . . when is the graduation?”

“I can put it off until you come back. Then we can have a graduation party and . . .”

No excuse for delaying.

Stiff and sore, I slipped off the couch, taking Eva’s hand in my bandaged ones. “Eva, when I come back, will you marry me?”

“Yes, Cory.” She flung herself in my arms.

Ouch, that hurt. But I savoured her warmth. I knew I would be vulnerable alone in Barresh, and it would be better if Eva came. It was too late now, but when I returned to deliver my first report to Nations of Earth, Eva would come back with me. Eva would be my wife.

Her father went around with the bottle, topping up the glasses. “We drink to that.”

JUST BEFORE DINNER, I escaped into the hall with the excuse of checking on the guards. Of course, I wanted to make a few calls, and felt a cheat for doing so, but I simply had to know if anything of note had happened. I didn't expect the emergency council to have concluded their meeting, but part of me was still seething about not being invited, even though I accepted that it was too late now to try to get in. I'd had my chance and, for whatever reason, when I faced him in his makeshift office, Danziger had chosen not to invite me.

I found the two guards in the furthest corner of the kitchen, the subject of shifty-eyed glances from the cook. Two empty soup bowls stood on a nearby table. The men sat on their knees, a veritable showcase of electronics spread out on the floor between them. Screens flickered, lights blinked.

With a sinking feeling, I recognised my comm unit in the middle of the electronic tangle. "*Mashara*, anything wrong?"

Moss-green eyes met mine. "The unit, Delegate. It had a listening bug. *Mashara* has disabled it."

"It had . . ."

I stared. A listening bug. Spyware. My first thought was that people were welcome to spy. I had nothing to hide. On the other hand, my midnight conversation with Delia hadn't been so glamorous, and . . . Nicha's father. *Shit*. I could already see the headlines: *Asto plans military action to free suspect*.

"Has *mashara* confirmed where it came from and who has been

listening?”

One of the guards held the unit out to me. I recognised the ID on the screen. Delia? It was suddenly too hot in the kitchen.

“Is it safe to use now?”

“It is, Delegate.”

“Thank you.”

I picked the unit up between my left wrist and the tips of my right hand taped-together fingers, put it on the table, looped the earpiece over my ear and punched the ID with my free thumb.

Delia answered within two rings.

“What the fuck is this, Delia?”

The cook gave me a wide-eyed look over his shoulder.

“Cory? What are you talking about?”

“Listening to me, spying on me. My staff have just identified a listening virus in my comm unit that came from you. I—”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. I don’t like being accused.”

“Then get your surveillance off me. I’m being followed. My communications are being tapped. The police tell me that Nicha made a call to request assistance, but he hasn’t been allowed to call anyone, has he? What the fuck is going on? Do you want to solve who shot the president, or do you want to blame the first person who comes along in absence of a real suspect? Do you—”

Click.

She’d broken the connection.

I tried again, but the number was dead. No answer.

Eva and her parents would probably be waiting for me, but I quickly tried Amarru’s number. She was busy.

Then, in a fit of despair, I entered the number of the person who had been trying to contact me when Eva told me to switch the unit off.

It rang a few times before someone answered, “Nixie Chan.” The typical Coldi deep honeyed tones of her voice almost made me cry with relief. I switched to Coldi.

“Nixie, my name is Cory Wilson, and I—”

“Ah, I tried to contact you earlier.”

“I know. I was busy. I’m sorry. I hear Amarru has asked you to look after Nicha’s case.”

“She has. It’s beyond belief. No one has heard from him. I’ve been asking to see him all day.”

“He can’t possibly have been involved in the attack on the president. I left him in the foyer—”

“I know. You watch it. I’ll get him out. If I’m not getting anywhere tonight, Danziger is not going to know what hit him tomorrow. I don’t think anyone in this city knows how many businesses we Coldi own. If you have any warm clothing, keep it handy, because we’re going to turn off the city heating.”

Even while the heating was still working, a chill tracked down my spine; within *gamra*, this would provide ammunition for those who said that Asto was taking over Earth by stealth. “Thank you for your support, but don’t you think that—”

“We’ll get him out. Don’t worry. We have everything organised.”

That was just what I feared. “Thank you.”

“No, thanks to you. If this goes to court, we’ll get the opportunity to prove the illegality of the citizenship case. We’ll—”

I heard the distinctive clang of the living room door.

“Nixie, by the way, do you have any thoughts on the sort of weapon that may have been used?” I came very close to mentioning the red circle of light, but all sorts of shit would fly if Danziger found out I had breached my promise. Besides, like Nicha, she didn’t see the colour red; few *gamra* people did.

“No, I don’t. It is rather strange, though. There is no vantage point to shoot from. I’m not convinced that something *was* shot, in fact. There are no traces of explosives.”

She’d been doing her research. More often than not, I wondered how the Coldi got all those data so easily.

“I still think it sounds like *gamra* technology. It’s definitely not

local.”

“Agreed, but—”

The door to the kitchen opened, letting in Eva. “Cory where are you—oh!” Her eyes widened. Concern. Annoyance. Anger. I wasn’t sure what to make of her expression. Probably all three.

I said, in a low voice, “Sorry, Nixie, I have to go.”

“Trouble?”

“Family dinner. Let me know if there are any important developments.”

“I will.”

“Thank you.”

I disconnected and pulled the earpiece off. “I’m sorry, Eva, but things are happening that are too important.”

She shrugged. “Dad always says that, too.”

Anger, then. A seed of annoyance crept up in me. What did she expect? That I spliced myself in two pieces?

I handed the unit back to the guards, and followed Eva out of the kitchen.

In the hall, she turned so abruptly I almost crashed into her. Tears welled in her eyes. And then she was in my arms.

“Eva, I’m really sorry. I really am, but—”

“You’re so distracted tonight.”

“I’m sorry. I’m tired. One doesn’t get shot at every day.” It was a lame attempt at levity.

“Oh, you poor thing.” She closed her arms around me, and I lost myself in the rush of a rose-scented kiss.

A maid cleared her throat as she walked past carrying a tray with dishes.

Eva broke the kiss and she straightened the collar of my shirt. “You should really have put on a clean jacket.”

“I know, but all my spare clothes are in Athens.” I’d taken a spare shirt, but hadn’t seen the need to drag along a spare jacket for a two-day visit.

In the living room the maid was unloading her tray onto the

table. Wine sparkled in glasses, and the smell of something Polish and hearty hung in the air.

We sat down. I forced myself to relax for Eva's sake. I ate and drank more than was good for me. I talked more than was good for me, too, Eva's hand on my knee under the table.

For once, talk was not about politics, but about churches, halls and dresses. I itched to go back to the hotel, but every time I thought to bring the subject up with Eva, she seemed to know what I was about to say and I relented. I was leaving after all, and in the last few months I had given Eva far too little of my time. If I wanted to be a good husband, I needed to put in a better effort, much better.

It got late, and then it got very late.

A maid came in with candles and Eva's father stoked the fire.

In the shelter of the bay window, I stole a few kisses, and could almost taste the day she would be mine. Then I wondered how Nixie was going, and how people would react to whatever she planned for tomorrow.

I was ready to leave some time after 2 am, shocked into silence by the harsh light in the hall, and the unflattering reflection of myself in the mirror—red-eyed, white faced, and not quite steady on my feet. Eva was right—the jacket was disgusting.

Eva's father wanted to call for a taxi, but one of the guards nudged my arm. "Delegate, *mashara* prefers we arrange our own transport."

The feel-good cocoon of food and alcohol evaporated in about one-hundredth of a second. The guard showed no outward sign of emotion, but I knew the subtleties. Something had happened while I was at dinner and I was sure the guards wouldn't tell me until we were in that taxi that probably waited around the corner.

I turned to Eva's father who would not have understood the guard's Coldi. "They have already arranged a car."

Eva's father laughed, not entirely genuine. "Well, I suppose they could have done that."

Both guards made no reaction, although I had no doubt they would have understood the barb.

I faced Eva, still so pretty at that unholy hour.

Her mouth twitched. "So . . . what time does your train leave tomorrow?"

That brought me fully back to the harsh reality. I held two tickets for the train back to Athens for ten tomorrow morning, but would I go?

Eva's face creased. "Cory?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. At this stage, I'm not even sure I'm going."

I sighed at the hopeful spark in her eyes. Of course I knew she didn't want me to go, but it hurt to see it acknowledged. "I'll let you know."

The maid said, "There's a taxi outside."

See, I'd been right.

I kissed Eva, said goodbye to her parents and followed the two guards into the rain.

Except the car wasn't a regular driverless taxi; it was one of the very few privately-owned vehicles in the city. Nothing on the doors or windows alluded to its owner, except the driver, whose Coldi ponytail glittered in the streetlight. A *gamra* contact then, someone out of the database.

Shit. If they didn't even trust taxis, something had happened indeed. The guard held open the door.

I settled in the back seat and forced a smile as I waved to Eva. Her face showed no concern, thankfully. No doubt everything *would* be fine, but just now, it would be nice if someone told me what was going on.

Doors slammed. The electric motor whined and we were off.

"*Mashara*, I'm sure it is time to tell me what this is about. You *are* aware that I no longer have my feeder?"

The guard didn't answer immediately; he was fiddling with his comm unit. The holo-screen lit his face with a bluish glow.

“Delegate.” He bent forward, peeling the earpiece off.

I attached the device to my ear.

Someone said, “Cory?” In that warm-hued tone between male and female. Coldi.

I recognised the voice. “Amarru.”

“Where are you now?”

“I just got in the car.”

“Tell the driver to avoid the city bypass.”

“What?”

“Just tell him, right now.”

“All right.” I relayed the message. The driver grumbled that he was aware of trouble.

“Amarru, can you tell me what this is about?”

“First up, there is a car behind you.”

I looked over my shoulder, but saw only an empty street. “I know that.”

“There is also a group of *police* at the hotel, and there is a trap on the bypass. Our bugs are better than theirs, Cory.”

“Thank you.” I made every attempt not to sound sarcastic, but I felt sick. The concepts “ours” and “theirs” were becoming horribly blurred. “Does this mean I am being targeted now?”

“Have you heard the press release from the emergency council?”

“No. I was at a family dinner.” See? I shouldn’t have given in to Eva; I should have kept my unit. I swear every time I had no communication I missed something important. Damn, damn it.

“The meeting only lasted about an hour and a half. Must be a record. Wait, I’ll read this out.” There was some rustling and clicking. “The Emergency council of Nations of Earth has declared that following the attack on President Sirkonen, member nations must ensure full cooperation to find and bring to trial the perpetrators, and has sanctioned the use of all available means in doing so. . . .”

“All available means? But . . .”

“That means using armed forces if necessary.”

A chill went down my spine. “That could mean war.”

“Danziger has just declared a state of emergency for Rotterdam. Already, there are riots in a number of places. People are looting shops owned by Coldi. And yes, the *police* want to talk to you. We’ve picked up some communication to that extent.”

“Shit. Are they going to give me the same treatment as Nicha?”

“I can’t answer that, but I have an offer: we can guarantee *gamra* protection on a flight that leaves for Athens in about an hour’s time.”

Leave Rotterdam. Now. That was as strong a suggestion as she had ever given me.

“I can’t. Not without Nicha.”

“I think Nixie is doing her best on that front. Nothing I can do; nothing you can do.”

I swallowed hard. “My luggage is at the hotel.” Buying time, surely.

“That’s been taken care of.”

I glanced over the seat. My suitcase lay in the back.

The car braked suddenly. The driver let out a fluent curse in Coldi and swerved into a side street. Between the two front seats, I glimpsed two police vans parked across the road.

Then we plunged into darkness. The driver hit the brakes as ahead of us, automatic gates swung open. We went down a hill, into a mass of buildings shrouded in darkness. I’d come this way to Eva’s house often enough to know where we were heading: one of the city’s Blue zones, where refugees, the poor and ill, lived in half-submerged high-rise buildings, and where gangs that prowled the waterways named themselves after the condition that stopped them getting jobs in the White zones: the Blind Bats, the Wheelies, that sort of thing.

Blocks of units lined the street, with only a few scattered lights. Most of the windows were dark, the glass broken. Discarded furniture and rubbish lined the street, leaving barely enough space

for vehicles. A tram rumbled in front of us, honking its horn. It slowed, and slowed even more.

“What’s all this about?” The driver threw the guard a glance and craned his head, but even in the back I could see that there was no room to overtake the tram.

From further down the street came shouts and the tinkling of breaking glass. People ran across the road. A couple of figures threw rocks at a building on the right. Their faces lit up with flashes of orange. Fire?

There was a “poof” of an explosion and a group of young men rushed past, some of them weaving their way between rubbish piles in homemade wheelchairs.

The guard next to me unclipped one of his guns from its bracket, his dark face all tension.

“Mashara?”

He shook his head, pressing his free hand to the earpiece; he glanced over his shoulder. A taxi and a bus waited behind us. No white cars.

The tram stopped in a small square. I realised this was a regular stop, because there was a platform with a sign on which I could just make out the letter L; the rest had broken off. Sure enough, this was the suburb of Lombardijen, hotbed of illegal and riotous activities.

Behind the tram stop were a couple of shops, and flames billowed from one of them. Silhouetted against the orange glow, figures ran towards the tram, carrying burning pieces of wood.

The tram’s passengers rose from their seats and crammed towards the back. A woman screamed.

“Get ready to take us out of here,” the guard next to the driver said.

I couldn’t see how; we were stuck. My heart was thudding in my chest. As long as no one discovered who, and what, we were . . .

The guard next to me nudged the control button for the

window so it opened a slit. He pushed his sunglasses onto his forehead and with the other hand raised the gun so the barrel stuck out between the glass and the window frame.

Two figures in black ran past the side of the tram, holding burning pieces of wood. Eyes glinted in our direction. One of the men shouted, “Chans!”

The guard tensed.

I yelled, “Don’t shoot!”

The other guard bellowed, “Now!”

The guard next to me stiffened.

I ducked.

I felt, rather than saw, the weapon discharge. The air crackled and chilled my skin.

The engine roared like I didn’t know electric engines could. Tyres screeched. The car shot forward, bumped one wheel onto the kerb. The wheels crunched through rubbish, slipped. The engine churned and screamed. Something hit the side door with a thunk.

Then the car shot away and the glow of fire and the screams faded. Sirens wailed somewhere close, came towards us, and passed.

Still the car gathered speed. I didn’t know there were city cars that could go this fast; the Coldi owner had probably inserted some non-Earth technology.

Slowly I raised my head from my knees.

“Are you all right, Delegate?” the guard next to me asked. He still held the gun. The metallic smell of discharge filled the car. I felt sick.

“You didn’t. . . ?”

“*Mashara* aimed away from live targets.”

Meaning what? That he hadn’t deliberately shot at people but might have hit some by mistake?

Oh shit, oh holy shit.

“To clear the way for the vehicle, Delegate.”

I blew out a breath.

I could still hear a tinny voice somewhere, but a glance over my shoulder only revealed an empty street. Dilapidated apartment blocks, crossings, trams whizzed by. The driver and the guard were talking about directions, arguing over the navigator screen about the best way to go.

Then I realised that the muffled voice I kept hearing was Amarru's. My earpiece had fallen onto the seat between my legs.

I fumbled to pick it up—damn, my hands hurt—and reattached it to my ear.

“Amarru?”

“Cory, are you still there?”

“I'm sorry. We just hit . . . one of the riots . . . I think.”

“Are you all right? Did I hear a discharge?”

“Yes. I don't think any damage was done. I think we have gone off course a bit. Where are we?” It was dark on both sides of the car.

“Diversion,” the driver replied, his attention firmly on the road. He was swerving around obstacles and, every now and then, there was the sound of the tyres hitting water. Definitely still outside the White zone. “Ask her where else there is trouble.”

Amarru said, “Put me on to him.”

She gave me the code to patch his feeder through the unit. A data-transfer icon blinked in the middle of the holo-screen; Amarru's voice fell quiet. The piece of Earth technology wasn't rigged up to deal with both types of communication at the same time. I cursed myself that I couldn't listen. This would have been so much easier if I still had my feeder.

For a few minutes, no one said anything. The driver sat silent, his eyes on the road, while trying to break the speed record for electric cars on badly-maintained roads that were half underwater.

Then the car charged up a dike. A gate materialised out of the dark and behind it, a well-lit road with blinding headlights of buses and taxis. The driver thumbed his comm unit, and the gate swung open. He steered the car through, looking in the rear-vision

mirror.

I glanced over my shoulder; between the gates which were closing again, the road was empty.

The car swung onto the main road, following the fence line. On the other side moonlight glimmered on water.

The icon at the unit blinked off and sound returned to my earpiece.

“We’re going to the airport, aren’t we?” I asked Amarru.

“That’s where I’ve directed him to go.”

“Do I get a say in this?”

“I’m offering a way to safety, Cory. Take advantage of it. I can’t guarantee no one will kill you if you stay here. We both know it’s the right thing to do. *Gamra* has no responsibility for the attack on the president. You haven’t done anything. Nicha hasn’t done anything. We are not letting Nations of Earth suggest we did, or letting them dictate the terms. We will talk, but on our terms, and not under threat. *Iyamichu ata.*”

That was it then. She threw the gauntlet, asked me to repeat the pledge to follow her, as I’d heard Coldi soldiers did before going for a mission. She could demand that of me; she was my superior in the loyalty network. What else could I do? If what had happened to Nicha was a guide of what I could expect, my options were limited.

Still, I stalled. “Is there a point in trying to get through customs? If the police want to intercept me, I won’t be allowed to leave the country.”

“I said that our bugs are better than theirs. We guarantee this flight only. Get out, Cory, while you can.”

No other option. “*Iyamichu ata.*”

“Good. Have a nice trip. I’ll see you when you get here.”

THE AIRPORT.

Glaring lights reflected in puddles outside the terminal. Taxis and buses waited for bleary-eyed passengers who streamed out of the building, suitcases in tow like little doggies.

I stumbled out of the car at the drop-off area, the meal and alcohol consumed at Eva's house heavy in my stomach and my decision heavy on my mind. Did pressure exerted by Amarru justify leaving Nicha? Would Nicha forgive me? Was I doing the right thing? I didn't know.

As diplomat, I was supposed to have carefully considered answers, but right now, I had none. I longed for a shower and a clean bed. I was a buggered-around runty pig that had missed the feed trough.

One of the guards took my luggage and led the way into the harsh light of the terminal. I fiddled with my comm unit. "*Mashara*, can I at least let Eva know that I'm leaving?"

The guard shook his head ever so slightly. "With respect for you safety, Delegate, not now."

"I have to let someone know, or everyone will think that this is a kidnapping. *Gamra* will be blamed even more. How about my father?" The guards would know my father wouldn't run to the press. He was retired, a New Colonist himself, and didn't hold much love for suspicious media.

"*Mashara* regrets not. Chief Delegate Akhtari's orders. Until *gamra* sources establish responsibility, it will be assumed that since

the first attempt on the Delegate's life failed, the perpetrators will try a second time. Since we are now in hostile territory, let us move." He gestured at the flight counter, where a smiling, blue-eyed girl was staring at our extraterrestrial party.

Hostile territory?

All right—it *was* a form of kidnapping then. *You'll take one of ours—we'll take one of yours.* While Nicha was held by the police, I was to face the wrath of *gamra's* Chief Delegate Akhtari, a dragon with a reputation of spitting fire. On the other hand, I'd get more information out of her than the police would get out of Nicha. Information that might be useful in getting him released.

I nodded to the guards. "Let's go then."

True to Amarru's word, my ID scanned without hitch. Right now, I didn't want to know how she achieved it, but I'd long suspected that all those computer chips, especially ones made in Japan and China early in the 21st century, had been seeded with little Coldi routines that no one noticed but could be called up with special commands. Those commands Amarru had activated on my behalf, and if this came out . . . I didn't want to know, I just didn't.

From the customs gate, the guards led me straight to the plane. My hasty entry, while the engines were already running, caused raised eyebrows. Some passengers elbowed each other. Others pointed. Cory Wilson had become a celebrity for all the wrong reasons.

The airhostesses shut the door after me and hustled us to an empty row of seats. One of the guards sat next to the window; I, in the middle; the second guard in the aisle seat.

During taxi and take-off, I stared out the window at the few pinpricks of light that pierced the rain. Down there, Eva was asleep and knew nothing. Tomorrow morning, a few hours away, Delia would call to bluster at me over the meeting I was late attending, and Vice President Danziger would find his representative gone.

And a whole lot would fly besides this plane, but in one way or another, I would find a way to deal with that. I had one chance to

prove myself worthy of this job, and this was it.

Into the lion's den, the cliché said.

By now, clouds obscured the last few lights and I leaned back in my seat.

The guard next to the window pretended to be asleep, but I didn't mistake the sensor behind his ear for a music player.

The other guard had taken out a pocket reader. He scrolled through text, but his eyes didn't move behind his sunglasses. Listening to something, it seemed.

I tapped the man's arm. "*Mashara*, can I have my reader, please?"

The guard passed me the padded bag.

I put the reader on the folded-out table. While I flicked through the menus a hostess came with coffee, which I accepted gratefully.

Ah—the news. I skipped sections about rioting, deliberately, because there was nothing I could do about it, and Eva was down there. . . . Deep breath, Mr Wilson.

. . . Meanwhile, sources close to the family have confirmed that the president has responded to the presence of people around his bed. . . .

Well, that was a bit of good news. Maybe Danziger would not captain the ship just yet.

I flicked through the other news items.

Another transport strike.

Housing problems on Taurus to be fixed. An article by freelance journalist Melissa Hayworth.

The housing shortage in Arcadia worsened as desert sands claimed another suburb. This came at the time that the Taurus governor-elect Marius Sena announced a project to protect the outer suburbs of the city. . . .

So . . . Melissa Hayworth specialised in non-Earth affairs. Interesting.

A link on her name brought up her personal information. Single, no children. She had grown up in Germany, where her

mother, after divorcing her first husband, had married a businessman by the name of Ludo Chan. Ah—that explained a lot.

I know what it is like, she had said.

She *did* know what it was like, living in two worlds. She was not so very different from me, having acquired a Damarcian stepmother when I was ten.

Melissa had done well at school and later won prizes for journalism. Frankly, she deserved better than Flash Newspoint.

The biography listed recent articles she had contributed, not just to Flash, but other news services as well.

Union toys with us. That gave her opinion loud and clear.

It's official: believers are out. That was not true, and I would have to fight to counter this perception, that somehow *gamra* thought that religion was primitive and needed to be renounced before Nations of Earth had any chance of full membership of *gamra*. It was the Coldi perception, emphatically not the *gamra* stand on the matter, and the two were not the same.

This morning's article was: *Vanished scientist had many secret ties*.

Did this have something to do with non-Earth affairs? I followed the link.

Most people in weather forecasting know British scientist Elsi Schumacher for her Earth-spanning climate models which won her the prestigious Selinger Prize for Scientific Excellence two years ago. People would not associate her with dealings with powerful extraterrestrial governments. Yet this is what seems to be the case, and these ties may yet prove the key to her disappearance.

After Dr Schumacher failed to turn up for work on Monday, investigators have delved into her life for possible clues to her disappearance. She is unmarried, and a possible unconfirmed love interest is a colleague of hers who has repeatedly denied any involvement. Dr Smith says that their relationship was platonic, as "Dr Schumacher seemed always far too busy to invest time in personal relationships." It seems likely that the clues to her

disappearance lie in her professional life. Recently, another side to this life has been revealed. Dr Schumacher had been working on a project funded by sources within the Union of Planetary Entities. . . .

Now that was interesting. Never mind that I got increasingly irritated with the insistence of the press on using that outdated and incorrect translation. It gave the impression that *gamra* was an equivalent of Nations of Earth. It wasn't. *Gamra eysh' zhamadata* meant *network of settled worlds*, literally. *Gamra* maintained the network, the Exchange, the only possible means of interstellar travel between the members, and all member entities had a say in its running, or, more precisely, who could use it and who couldn't.

I clicked on a link which showed pictures of Elsi at a dinner function with Coldi delegation members—I recognised none of them. Another picture had her sitting at the table next to, of all people, Sirkonen. The pair were deeply engaged in conversation, Sirkonen holding a glass of wine. What was he doing there? The caption said the picture was taken at a prize-giving ceremony. Perhaps Sirkonen had been there to hand out the science prize Dr Schumacher had won. Maybe. It seemed to me that he was far too much of a heavyweight to be present at a smallish ceremony, let alone to chat so informally with someone not in a high political position. I let it slide.

Back to Melissa's article.

No one at the Dawkins Centre for Climatic Research could confirm the exact nature of the project, only that Dr Schumacher had recently come under funding stress, and that she had perhaps over-stretched herself and her project members in order to secure funding. A colleague, who did not wish to be named, mentioned several visits from extraterrestrials—confirmed to be Coldi—at the scientist's lab. After at least one of these visits, she appeared to be agitated. However, searches on the Centre's computer have found nothing out of the ordinary. . . .

I linked through to the Dawkins Centre, where I found the

scientist's name listed on the staff. Her personal area listed her prize and a description of the research, but there was also another link: *whole-planet modelling*.

That brought up a selection of maps with coloured areas. One was of Taurus, sections of the continent shown in red and orange hues. That summed up how I felt about the four years I had lived there. Hot, hot, and hotter.

There was a map of Mars, too. New Taurus even, although that one had large areas of white.

Descriptions of weather patterns, air streams and weather trends. All based on the models that described the process of global warming as it had happened on Earth. Oh, I could well see the value of the expertise. Apparently, if fifty-year trends were to be believed, Taurus was in the process of becoming hotter, if that was at all possible. Just the thought made me sweat. A small ice age was expected for Earth within the next thousand years.

Wow. Interesting stuff. Bring on the mammoths.

I went through a few more screens. Coloured blotches superimposed over maps. Oceans, continents, mountain ridges.

Hang on—hadn't I seen a map like this before—in the information Sirkonen had given me?

I dug the datastick from my pocket and inserted it in the reader. The first page still came up empty. My mind filled in the blanks—A report written by Elsi Schumacher of the Dawkins Centre?

Yesterday, I had been too tired to notice much. Now the lines underneath the coloured sections stood out clearly. I was looking at a map of Asto, the Coldi home world. Two continents curved towards each other in mirrored moon shapes, a mountain ridge along a land-locked ocean. The continent on the left was home to the mega-city of Athyl, the epicentre of Coldi society. Beratha, the other major settlement centre, was on the second continent.

What did all these colours mean? Purple, blue and green, a bit like the reflections in Coldi hair. I flicked to the legend *predicted*

rainfall changes.

It rained little on Asto; large areas of the planet were dead and uninhabitable even to heat-adapted Coldi, and no other people could visit the planet. Asto's people found water in deep fissures that ran through the desert like lashes of a whip. They irrigated the desert, and grew mushrooms on the fissure walls, but much of Asto's food was imported these days, mostly from Ceren, the second world in the system, green and lush, and the home of the city-state of Barresh, *gamra* headquarters.

I tilted my head sideways to read the small print on the map . . . the models predicted an increase in rainfall, and not just a little bit, either. Nasty stuff. Rain on Asto was high in acids, in hydrofluoric acid to be precise, stuff that ate its way even through glass.

But what about all this was so important to Sirkonen?

The guard tapped me on the arm, gesturing at the reader. "Does the Delegate want me to take that? We're about to land."

I hated going through the security checks at the airport in Athens at the best of times. Black-clad Nations of Earth personnel scanned all our luggage while surly Greek border guards with guns formed a lethal line keeping queued-up and impatient passengers in check. There were still people who didn't understand why, when passports and visas had been scanned and approved and luggage collected, there was yet another, far more intrusive, border check by Greek and Nations of Earth military.

Yet, failing any form of agreement between Nations of Earth and *gamra*, these guards were the only line of defence against criminal elements from other worlds; Athens was a tightly-guarded exclusion zone. Getting out was even harder than getting in.

Did I have any forbidden items, such as weapons, spyware, electronics that could be turned into spyware—there was a long list.

I showed my reader and infusor. More guards were called, while the items went from hand to hand. I was flagged as an interplanetary passenger and Person Of Interest. They searched my bag, every item laid out on the table. Eyebrows rose at the sight of my bloodied shirt.

“Had an accident,” I explained, and showed them my bandaged hands. My heart thudded, because I was certainly the very type of person these guards were here to stop leaving, but Amarru’s promise held, and I walked into the terminal hall onto the only piece of land on Earth where *gamra* people could come without Earth-based ID or visa.

A car with driver waited outside the building, the small *gamra* symbol inconspicuously on the front passenger window. I knew the young man behind the wheel; he was a local who earned a bit of money while he studied law at University. It was comforting to see a familiar face.

He took my luggage while I slipped into the back seat, the guards in their usual positions.

Then we were off and the car slotted into the steady stream of buses and taxis.

There was no denying that the presence of the Exchange was beneficial to Athens. Although the ridiculous border control had done a pretty good job at killing tourism to the area, *gamra* brought much business to the city, with riches that more often than not didn’t originate on Earth. The entire streetscape reflected it in subtle ways: in the mixture of building styles; in the neat Coldi text on the walls of apartments, advertising, Coldi-style, who lived within; in the thick growths of oleanders planted in strict symmetrical patterns; in the kids whizzing down the footpath on board-scooters; in the maroon curtains and sheets flapping on washing lines.

Even in the way people on the street moved in groups of two, or four, or eight.

“You’re very quiet today, Mr Wilson,” the driver said.

I jolted upright.

We had left the traffic behind and now followed an oleander-lined road between six-storey blocks of concrete flats. "I'm tired."

"Late night?"

"Yeah." He could certainly say that again, and I wondered if he hadn't heard what had happened, but had no desire or energy to inform him. I was looking forward to a room in the short-term accommodation at the Exchange: a bath, clean clothes, and a good nap. The Exchange wouldn't open until after dark, a rule lingering from the time of hiding and secrecy, and kept that way because it suited arrangements with local air traffic control.

Stately houses behind high walls replaced the apartment blocks. Spreading pine trees provided dappled shade. The road wound lazily up a hill.

Almost there.

A man walked a dog past the cream-coloured wall that surrounded the Exchange complex. He gave our car no more than a cursory glance when we turned into the driveway.

The gates were closed, a solid wall of metal. I did a mental double-take. I'd first come here twelve years ago, and this had been my home for eight years. I had never seen the gates closed.

"Has there been trouble here, too?" A chill crept over my back; my lazy feeling of safety vanished.

"Not yet, but things are tense in some parts of the city. Nations of Earth sent an aircraft carrier into Piraeus late last night. Some people didn't like this and have been keeping the police busy." *Coldi* protesters, no doubt. And police would be aided by Nations of Earth servicemen; I had no doubt about that, either. Anything to keep the *Coldi* faction under control. No, Nations of Earth didn't *like* this little enclave of alien-ness, at all.

The sticker on the windscreen let out a tiny flash of light. The gates clicked open and moved inward, revealing the driveway lined with majestic date palms leading up to the building. Ten storeys, white, and looking very much like the private hospital it

had once been.

Home.

Without Nicha.

As the car crawled up the driveway I glanced at the furthest wing which disappeared into the hillside. That part of the building was a recent addition. It spilled over with equipment to run the generator which powered the peripheral equipment of the Exchange. In the old days—and the original Exchange node had been built in 1968—the power-hungry devices frequently blacked out the entire city. Another reason why running at night made sense.

On old photographs, the hill was covered with pine trees, hiding the opening to the docks, a concrete maw which used to be a lot smaller than the present one. Now it was free of surrounding vegetation and . . . its metal shutter open?

What the . . .

The car stopped under the shady awning. I let myself out, and while I walked around the car to get my luggage, became aware of the buzzing of many voices. A sea of people crammed in the foyer of the building, a huge hall, normally almost empty.

I stopped, turning to the guards, another chill creeping up my spine. “*Mashara*, what is going on?”

“People are scared. They are trying to leave. *Gamra* have authorised emergency daytime departures.”

The chill increased. Riots against Coldi shops and houses, the emergency council sanctioning military intervention, warships in port . . .

“Don’t worry, Delegate. We have authorisation for preference. Let’s go.”

They rushed to the building, leaving no time or breath for questions.

Once the automatic doors opened, noise and heat washed over me. The hum of voices like angry bees. The guards cleared a way into the crowd. Their tall forms towered over the sea of Coldi

heads, glistening like the inside of an abalone shell. I also spotted the diminutive forms of two Kedrasi with their distinctive fox-red hair and mottled skin, but those, and myself, were the only non-Coldi people. Haggard-looking families, surrounded by bags and boxes and suitcases and crying children, formed huge snaking lines before the counter against the far wall.

“Wait here, Delegate.”

The guard with the sunglasses wrestled his way to the counter while the other remained with me.

In the far corner of the hall, people crammed before a wallscreen.

On the screen, a man stood behind a dais bearing the Nations of Earth symbol. His skin looked sallow and lights made sweat on his forehead glisten.

“... a projectile, which pierced part of his lung and intestine. He was rushed into the hospital immediately, suffering internal bleeding. Doctors have been working since then to repair the damage and save his life. . . .” The man wiped his face. Silence hung heavy in the non-Earthly audience. “Unfortunately, the fight was lost about half an hour ago.”

My heart skipped a beat. And another one. Sirkonen had *died*?

People stirred. A young Coldi boy standing on tiptoes in front of me asked the adult with him, “What is he saying?” He used the accusatory-he pronoun form.

“He says that the *president* has died.”

Through the roaring of blood in my ears, the voice of the Nations of Earth spokesman went on, “. . . I now pass the microphone to Acting President Sigobert Danziger, who will make a statement on behalf of the Nations of Earth executive committee and the emergency council.”

Danziger came up to the microphone, a stunned, emaciated toad. He’d probably had less sleep than me.

He opened his mouth, but an announcement in the hall blurred his first words.

“... will be assuming the presidency as of now. I will work with the committee appointed by President Sirkonen to hold new elections. Meanwhile, let it be known that no expense will be spared to uncover those guilty of this attack and bring them to trial. . . .”

A man next to me mumbled, “They say *we* are responsible for the president’s death.” Also using the accusatory pronoun.

Someone tapped me on the shoulder.

“Delegate?” The guard gestured towards the counter. “The Delegate mustn’t linger.”

“This news is important, *mashara*.”

“It is more important that the Delegate move to the counter.” He held out his hand, showing a dark-skinned palm. “Delegate, please? The Delegate’s documents.”

I rummaged in my pocket and found my citizenship pass, which he gave to the woman behind the counter. The people in the queue shot me strange looks.

I subtly shifted the sides of my jacket, showing my shirt in *gamra* blue. That earned me some respectful nods. Lips murmured, *Delegate*. I hated myself, drawing on status to jump the queue when all these people had much more pressing reasons to get out.

The female receptionist had my information up on the screen, in curly Coldi script. She took the black citizenship pass out of the reader and handed it back to me. “If the Delegate is so kind to follow *mashara* to the departure hall, but please do not linger.” Her voice was barely audible over the noise.

I followed the guards through the crowd, out the hall. We ran through the corridors, one guard in front, one behind. The guards’ legs were much longer than mine, and they only had to jog to keep up with me, while I was going flat out, sweltering in the increasing temperature.

Nor were we the only people in a hurry. Families lugged big bags, their faces grim. Children cried; their parents shouted. Others tried to push past them. People massed at the doors where

everyone needed to scan their citizenship cards.

Small trolleys ran along rails on the walls, quietly going about their business of deliveries, oblivious to the crowd.

A sea of people waited at the lifts; the guards urged me into the staircase, which was also full of people. Hurry, hurry, hurry. Some people just *couldn't*. There was a woman carrying twin toddlers while struggling with luggage. An old man needed to take the steps one by one, holding up the flow. The lift zoomed past, faces pressed against the cubicle's glass walls.

About fifteen sweaty minutes later, I burst into the light, heat and noise of the departure hall. At this time of day, it should have been dark and empty of life, but all lights blazed overhead. Aircraft occupied every bit of space of the ten levels of balconies around the huge hall's perimeter. People crowded around ground-hugging shapes with spreading wings. Cargo doors gaped. Shuttles for passengers, heavier craft for freight, even the smaller Trader craft with powerful engines, every single craft had opened its doors to the tide of Coldi refugees.

Engines fired up, whined. Lights flicked on and off. Doors thudded shut. The air hummed with communication, so much that crackles of charge zapped blue in midair where too many signals collided. I'd heard this could happen, but I had never seen it.

The guards urged me along the gallery, where a crowd was cramming up the stairs into a public shuttle, the same craft on which I had travelled on my earlier visits to Barresh, a sleek form, about the size of a medium-sized airliner, which made it large for *gamra* transport. Ceiling lights reflected in its gleaming purple-tinted metal. Flashing pinpricks of red light lined the wings.

A woman in a temperature-protection suit called out, "1876-336 for Barresh?"

I recognised the code that identified me with the Exchange.

"Positive," one of the guards called. He didn't even breathe heavily after the run. "Go in, Delegate."

A siren hooted. From a level somewhere below, an explosive

roar made the air vibrate. A silver shape shot across the hall. It flew into the tunnel, while a warning siren honked and the lower gallery jolted into movement, rotating slowly to position the next craft opposite the tunnel exit.

“Come, Delegate.”

One guard on each side, I climbed the steps, to be greeted by the two staff.

“Delegate, *mashara*.”

The air inside the cabin prickled my nose with that familiar metallic scent that characterised *gamra* technology.

A hush accompanied me down the aisle. Turning heads, raised eyebrows, curious glances.

By far the majority of passengers were Coldi. Some had dyed their peacock hair black, but most had not. About two hundred, I guessed, in neat rows of seats, four to each side.

There was a row of three empty seats about halfway down. I sank down between my guards, sweating and puffing. Various items of clothing spilled out the luggage compartment under the seat, so I stacked my bag and reader at my feet. Staff rushed to take the items and secure them in the nets above.

Someone thudded the door shut. Air cyclers hissed humidity out of vents in the walls and ceiling, making my ears pop.

Two flight personnel strode to the front of the passenger compartment and clipped retractable metal wires to each other's harnesses. Both wore dark Pilot's Guild suits.

The engines started up, making the floor hum.

A light flashed on the far side of the departure hall. I peered at the window, but the reflection of the inside of the cabin stopped me from seeing much.

The pitch of the floor hum increased.

The lights inside the cabin went off. A child wailed.

Now I could see a door open and a group of five or six figures burst out onto the gallery outside. One of them stopped to speak into an earpiece, while the others ran forward, shouting, at us, it

seemed. I craned my neck, trying to see what went on. An attendant tried to wave them away; one of the men was pointing. Agitated talk, with lots of hand signals.

The other passengers had seen them, too, and were gaping out the window.

A warning siren trumpeted sharp blasts of sound.

Then, with a sudden jump, the shuttle jerked into action. The lights in the hall flashed by. Several passengers had undone their seat belts and fell on top of one another. Shouts, scrambling. A child crying for its mother.

I was pressed in my seat.

Darkness, then bright daylight. The backrest of the chair became the floor. Wall panels vibrated with power.

I concentrated only on breathing. In. Out. In. Out. With this pressure on my chest, it was easy to forget.

One of the crew abseiled down from the front of the aisle to help stranded people back into their seats. Admonishing words were spoken. Passengers were to keep their seatbelts on at all times.

“But those men . . .” a woman protested.

“Nothing to do with us,” the crewmember said, his face impassive. He handed the child back to its mother, then let himself down further towards the back of the craft, checking seat belts and luggage. Beads of sweat glistened on his forehead.

The departure had been sudden, even for them. Almost as if the pilot got an order to get out immediately.

Next to me, the guard fiddled with the receiver on his belt. I tried to catch his attention, but he seemed absorbed in whatever he was hearing.

Gradually, the craft levelled out, while remaining in a steady climb. I could lift my head now and risked a glance out the window. The tapestry of Mediterranean islands stretched out below in patterns of blue, ochre and green. The horizon didn't curve. Yet.

To the right and slightly above us, I spotted the slight wave of

air that indicated that another craft flew there. Below us was yet another. But below that, a few dark spots moved over the tapestry of hills, bays and islands.

I squinted, and the more I looked, the more black spots I discovered. At least fifty of them, flying in neat formation. “*Mashara*, am I mistaken or are those aircraft?”

“They are, Delegate.” The guard lowered his earpiece, and met my eyes. “Nations of Earth. Military hoverjets.”

HOVERJETS—FROM the aircraft carrier that had come into the harbour last night. I could hear Amarru's voice *by all available means* . . .

A military blockade. I breathed in and out deeply, trying not to think of Nicha and all those others, trapped down there.

And yet I didn't understand. Yesterday, Danziger had wished me luck, reluctantly, but he had done it. A few hours later, he had authorised nothing less than war. Based on what?

I took my reader on my lap, but besides what I already knew, none of the news services offered answers. All had large headlines on Sirkonen's death, with pictures and obituaries. Few elaborated on the police investigation.

Danziger couldn't gag the media unless Nations of Earth declared a true state of emergency. Had they done that? A cold feeling crept over my skin while below me the planet that was my home receded. A feeling that the gates had closed, with me on the wrong side of the fence.

A wave of panic. I wanted to scream, *wait*, and *Eva*. I wanted to be down there, to at least bash some sense into Danziger's dim-witted brain. What in hell's name did the man think he was doing?

Breathe in, breathe out.

There was nothing I could do.

And meanwhile, around me, life went on incredibly *normal*. There were relieved voices, some laughter even. I imagined people clapping each other on the shoulder. *Hey Dad, good that we moved*

when you said we should. We got out. We're going home.

Not me, not me.

The crewmembers moved about on their normal leads: those attached to rails along the ceiling. They carried baskets with meal packs, colour-coded and sealed, as well as covered containers with hot drinks, each with a bright red satchel that contained the straw.

Serving refreshments was something the Pilot's Guild had learned from observing human flights. No doubt local merchants and Traders had a hand in it, as they were always active when there was something to be sold. No doubt, too, there was a Coldi-owned business somewhere in Athens that made these food packs.

Apparently, selling something in midair created a problem, seeing one was not within the territory of one of the entities, so where did Trading levies need to be paid?

I was glad to leave that nasty bureaucratic problem to the authorities and simply gave my *gamra* account to pay for my bag of nuts and a container of a hot drink the Coldi persistently called coffee, but had nothing to do with it.

For starters, it was dark green. It was made from one of the thousands of species of mushrooms native to the aquifers of Asto. It came in powder form and went into a filter like coffee. The Coldi word for it was *manazhu*. It was also very, very bitter, but did not contain acid or excessive levels of fluorides, as much Coldi food did, so was classified as a green-code. Strangely, and much to Eva's disgust, I had taken a liking to it. She said it made my breath stink. It tasted even better with a good dollop of rum, which probably made my breath stink even more.

I sipped, letting the liquid glide down my throat in small hot gulps that brought a sense of comfort back to my rattled mind.

You have one shot at proving your worth, Mr Wilson.

One opportunity to come up with the goods, whatever form it would take. A truce, a solution, or merely a tempering of anger. If I could stop *gamra* turning the clock back to the Kershaw days, if I could keep Nicha's father and his massive air fleet and their

weapons firmly in Asto's air space, if I could shed some light on who could have attacked Sirkonen's office, how and why.

The sky was already quite dark. White clouds swirled in a pattern no one but an off-world traveller would ever see.

We must be almost at prescribed height.

I turned off and packed away my reader. The transfer would soon be upon us.

As if in answer, a voice came over the intercom. "The pilot has just requested transfer. Please make sure that any loose items are safely stowed."

In that moment of total nothingness, when the shuttle jumped through the network, when the Exchange cores down in Athens and the one in Barresh connected with each other and we were flung about like a pebble in a bucket, not once, but four times, the smallest piece of paper became a projectile.

I leaned back in my seat, feeling sick, wishing I hadn't eaten those nuts. This was the part I really, really hated. And I tried to reason away that irrational fear.

The light started flashing over the passengers' heads.

Eleven . . . ten . . . nine . . .

I grabbed the armrests, wishing I were somewhere else.

Eight . . . seven . . . six . . .

Passengers went oddly quiet, as if most were equally ill-impressed with the process.

Five . . . four . . . three . . .

Then to think that the Traders did this for a living, sometimes a few times a day. Jumping through the network like jellybeans, following daylight wherever people were awake enough to talk business.

Two . . . one . . .

Everything went white.

I floated in thin air; didn't feel the seat at my back or the seatbelt biting in my shoulders. I was flying in space without anything to support me. There was no noise, no movement, just

utter stillness.

I couldn't move, couldn't breathe, couldn't see. I was *aware* but wasn't, as such, alive. I had just ceased to be.

A flash of light. A rush of air.

Sensation returned. My heart went *thud*, and *thud* and *thud*. Life sped up. Everything around me—the backs of chairs, walls, the ceiling—took shape in rainbow-coloured hues which bled into each other until all colours overlapped. My ears echoed with a boom I had never heard.

And we still flew. I checked the clock on my comm unit. An hour and sixteen minutes had just disappeared.

Outside the window was nothing but darkness.

That was one transfer. Three more to go, with periods of waiting in between.

All of a sudden, a blanket of exhaustion fell over me. My destiny was no longer in my hands. I was beyond worry.

I leaned back in my seat, and did something I would not have thought possible: I fell asleep.



“Delegate.” Someone shook my arm.

I jerked upright, squinting against a glare of sunlight which illuminated the face of one of the flight crew. “Please tighten your harness, Delegate. We’re about to land.”

I groaned, fishing on the seat for the straps which had loosened with my weight.

Sunlight.

Did that mean I'd slept through the three other transfers? I checked my watch. It was about ten minutes behind the time we'd left Athens. Yup. That always happened. People argued over whether time had actually gone backwards or whether an entire day had gone, but when you jumped through the anpar lines, time was irrelevant, except that when you went back to your place of origin, time had progressed by roughly as much as you had

travelled, never mind that time-keeping devices you took with you refused to measure travelling time.

The guard to my left leaned back in his seat, his open mouth emitting small sighs with every breath. I felt guilty—they would have been just as exhausted as I was. The other guard was digging under the seat for something that must have fallen. I was still shivery from being so rudely woken up. The uncomfortable position in which I had slept—my head bent back against the headrest—hurt my neck, but at least I felt a bit more refreshed. A tiny bit. Ready to handle whatever was thrown at me next.

The craft banked. The window to my left showed an expanse of water interspersed with reeds. The double shadow of the craft glided over the glittery surface, one side with a bluish rim and one with a yellow one, from the system's twin suns, the larger white F class Beniz and the smaller and yellow G class Yaza, two dots smaller than our sun close together, because we were further from them than the sun was from Mars. Not much of a chance to let me forget where I was.

Barresh. A powerful city-state on the world of Ceren.

Barresh, City of Islands.

Some of those islands were sliding into view. Each scrap of land overflowed with houses, little cubes of ochre stone. No two houses were the same, no street was straight, no market place rectangular. As much as the Coldi hated asymmetry, the Barresh locals felt uneasy about uniformity and sameness, or straight lines. Silver tracks of the railway linked the larger islands like threads in a spider web.

Lower, the craft went, and lower. Passengers in front of me were getting restless, collecting items from the nets, admonishing children.

We passed over water, interspersed with fields of green, boats and harvesters with agricultural produce, jetties and storage sheds, then ochre-tiled roofs, some with coiling patterns in grey.

The craft turned sharply and braked in midair. Hover engines

came on and with its nose pointed slightly up, the shuttle floated down. The floor vibrated, until the landing gear hit the ground with a faint bump.

The engine hissed and whined in an ever-lower pitch.

As the crew unclipped their safety lines, passengers rose. I pushed myself out of my seat, still feeling dizzy. My reader almost fell from the ceiling net when I undid the fastening. A door was opened at the front of the craft. I joined the line of people shuffling forward.

When I stepped onto the covered ramp, tropical heat fell over me like a suffocating blanket. Sweat trickled down my stomach before I even reached the building, not that reaching shelter brought much relief.

The building had no glass and no walls, just wide eaves to stop seasonal rain. In the wide-open terminal hall, a crowd waited, mostly Coldi, held back by black-clad Barresh city guards. There were cries and shouts, both amongst the passengers and in the hall. People surged against a barrier. A woman crawled underneath. A guard tried to hold her back, but, being Coldi, she shoved him back so hard he fell against his colleagues.

The woman ran down the ramp, shoved past me and all the other passengers, ignoring indignant shouts, to throw her arms around a girl of about six. "You came. I was so worried about you."

She was crying; the mother was crying. She lifted the girl into her arms, still looking around. "Azisha, where is Azisha?" The girl shrugged and the mother addressed passengers walking past. "Excuse me, have you seen a young boy on the flight?"

People looked away, and continued walking. I was pushed along by the flood of people, into the building.

I swallowed hard, staring at the guard's armour-clad back.

The mother's voice still rose over the murmur, a desperate shriek. "Where is Azisha?"

Damn. I saw Nicha as I'd left him in the president's office. Alone. No chance of joining me.

“Where is Azisha?”

An event where I had been present had changed the lives of these ordinary people.

Damn. I wiped my face.

Then we were in the terminal building. Local news reporters with their head-mounted recording gear rushed forward. Not to me, but to one of the few other non-Coldi who had been on the flight.

The entire hall beyond was full of people. All Coldi, most with haggard, emotionless faces lining up for counters. They might need to get another flight to Asto, or, if they had no permit to live there, as I knew many didn't, they were truly lost. As far as I knew, the Exchange node at Athens had been spewing forth a tide of refugees for at least ten hours. A few thousand of them were in this hall.

“Delegate, this way.”

The two guards made a path for me through the crowd. I caught some stares, furtive glances from gold-flecked Coldi eyes.

“Where are all these people going, *mashara*?” No way would there be enough room in the city's guesthouses.

The man shrugged, averted his eyes. His mouth twitched in an unusual way. I looked at him more intensely, and pieces of the puzzle fell together.

Refugees.

His native Indrahui, a world torn apart with internal conflict. *Gamra* had let the situation blow up; isolationist politics did that. Everyone to themselves, sort out your own problems; we won't interfere for the sake of keeping the interstellar peace, never mind what happened on the planet. Seriously, Danziger could teach *gamra* a thing or two about refugee crises if he cared to try and they cared to listen.

And my guard, maybe both of them, had once been refugees themselves.

They'd dressed in combat gear, they'd cautioned me about going to Eva's house, they'd stopped me making calls to Eva,

they'd dragged me through the Exchange building in Athens . . . while desperate to get out themselves.

They would have been through hell the past few hours. My face glowed with embarrassment. I should have realised this much sooner.

"*Mashara*, let us go to the island. We will be safe there." Inclusive-we, the word they meant specifically *all of us present here*. It was a rare enough form that I hoped they didn't think I was making a mess of my pronouns.

Out of the terminal, to the station.

People queued at the ticket reader to get onto the train platform. The train waited, a sleek shape like a bullet, doors yawning open.

The first guard slipped into a window seat, I sat next to him, and the second guard remained standing in the aisle, handing me a cloth. The air felt sticky on my tongue and smelled like tea-tree oil.

I wiped my face. "Thanks, *mashara*." I had an audience: everyone in the carriage stared at me, a thin, pale-skinned, profusely sweating excuse for a human. My stink probably offended their sensitive noses.

At meeting my eyes, most nodded a polite greeting. Items of blue clothing identified other *gamra* delegates amongst them; none had security guards. Most were non-Coldi. We were all lucky and extremely privileged.

With a hiss of closing doors, the train jumped into motion. It whizzed over the rails, almost noiselessly, as if it flew over the water. Clumps of reeds and small islands whipped by. The two suns hung low over the horizon, casting their glow through a blue haze.

I turned my face into a cool stream of air that flowed from a ceiling vent. Breathing deep hyperventilating breaths. My heart was racing. Ceren's air had a higher percentage of oxygen than Earth's. It took a day and a few strong capsules of medication to become used to it. Medication that was somewhere in my luggage,

which was goodness-knew-where, but hopefully on its way to my accommodation or I'd be in serious trouble.

The train shot into the shadow of the island that housed the *gamra* buildings, and then shortly after into the tunnel that sliced into the artificial structure. Whining of metal on metal reflected off stone walls. A few moments of darkness followed.

Then artificial light, greenish and bright. The train slowed. The station. Blue flashed into the windows. Security, checking the passengers' badges. We squeezed into the aisle, one guard on either side of me. I was glad to have them close, because I was suffering dizziness.

Out of the train, onto a well-lit underground platform, where passengers' footsteps scuffled on ice-smooth paving. People spoke in soft voices. All so civilised, compared to scenes at the Exchange.

The guards led me up a flight of stairs.

We emerged into the middle of the courtyard at the centre of the complex. Apart from the entrance to the train station, it housed numerous terraces, drinking stations and other socialising nooks towards its narrower end. Giant trees spread dappled shadows over people clad in dazzling arrays of blue sitting at tables, while waist-high serving robots whirled between them.

The buildings of the *gamra* complex rose around the perimeter of the courtyard. Ochre stone turned golden in the late afternoon light. Carved columns supported wide awnings; carved doors hid deep in shadows. Creepers and climbing plants trailed up trellises nailed to walls. Arched doorways, leaning pillars, mosaic paving, glassless windows, all according to the local style.

I was swaying on my feet, not in the mood to admire the architecture, or to study the faces of those on the terraces in the hope of finding someone familiar, and a chat, normality. The guards strode across the courtyard into an arched entranceway which led into a kind of Roman plaza where the air was cool and humid. I breathed relief.

The guards led me up a wide staircase, and another one, where

we emerged at the top gallery level. A thick carpet muffled our footsteps. Couches stood against walls between apartment doors, and vases and flowering plants hung from the balcony railings. Across the cavity of the plaza, the far wall rippled with trickling water. Cool air, heavy with humidity, circulated under the domed ceiling. A central coloured glass window let through spots of sparkling colours, which twinkled and glittered in the pond at the bottom of the waterfall. The floor of the hall, two storeys down, bore an exquisite mosaic of a five-pointed star in blood-red and white stone.

The guards stopped at a plain door, made of metal, without a handle. One of the men slid the key card through the access slot. The lock clicked and the door rumbled open.

I stepped into the semidarkness of some sort of foyer, where my footsteps echoed.

There was a sharp metallic sound and lights flicked on.

The foyer was huge, for a private apartment at least, with a floor smooth as ice. Mosaic in yellows and browns formed curvy patterns near the walls, with, in the centre of the hall another five-pointed star, the symbol of Barresh.

Carved columns ran along the walls to meet high in the vaulted ceiling.

A cushioned couch stood against the left-hand wall with a low table before it. If this was a doctor's waiting room, it would have had magazines. This table was empty, its polished surface reflecting light pearls set in brackets along the walls.

Opposite the entrance, a corridor stretched into darkness; the slight angles of the walls gave it a zigzagging appearance. In true local fashion, there were no right angles in this apartment.

Apart from the corridor, at least four doors opened into the hall. Unlike the front door, which was of the sliding type, these were the local design that rolled up sideways, like a beach mat. Space-efficient, but not good for privacy. The doors consisted of slats bound together with wire and held closed by metal blade

springs. Two of these doors were closed, showing massive gaps between the slats. An open door led to an airy sunroom, giving a glimpse of a couch and a chair, a balcony full of plants.

Inside the last door, a red light blinked in total darkness. Communications, I guessed. A really fancy apartment, with its own communications hub.

I'd seen plenty of pictures to know that I was now in the main residential building. The other residential wings housed small apartments, one to each delegate, each of which had a bedroom, a sitting room and an office. Most of these were on the lower floors of the buildings.

But now we'd come up two floors in the main building, where important *gamra* officials had their residences. Two-storey affairs with large balconies, separate offices and kitchens and accommodation for staff. Garden apartments. Of which this had to be one.

In other words: what was I doing here?

The two guards had remained by the door, one of them talking into his receiver. They looked not in the least interested in what I did, nor did they seem inclined to come in and introduce me to whoever I was to meet here. Calling them would be undignified.

I dropped my bag and reader on the couch and sat down, hoping this wasn't going to take too long. My shirt clung to me with sweat.

There were footsteps in the sitting room and a tall figure glided to the door, clad in an elegant gown of solid cobalt blue with gold edging. Gossamer strands of silver hair hung over knobbly shoulders.

One look into the paper-skinned face and I jumped up and bowed, arms by my sides. "Delegate Akhtari."

Whose idea was it to make me face her now, in this state?

"Well-met, Delegate." Her voice carried a hint of hardness that belied her stately, elfin appearance. "Let us go inside."

She gestured me into the sitting room, which was even bigger

than the foyer, if possible. The two couches I had seen from the hall stood in one corner of the carpet in a v-formation. In the far corner of the tapering room stood a large and heavy wooden table with eleven high-backed chairs. In the middle of the room water steamed in a circular pool, surrounded by cushioned benches.

Floor-to-ceiling windows ran all along the far side, including some that slid open to give access to a balcony that might have been a garden for all the greenery.

Delegate Akhtari made a gesture with her hand to indicate that I should sit.

I sank down on one of the couches. She settled opposite me, clasping her hands and looping them around her knees. Her back remained ramrod-straight.

"The establishment regrets the haste with which the Delegate had to come here. The Delegate's trip was pleasant enough?" Oh so formal, she used only the most distant of pronouns.

"Concern appreciated, Delegate. It was."

Never mind what happened before my travel started. Never mind the chaos in Athens and at the refugees at the Barresh Exchange. But then I decided to mention it anyway. The swifter the issue was dealt with, the better. "The Delegate was caught in an unfortunate situation." How about: the Delegate *caused* an unfortunate situation?

"Unfortunate indeed." She fixed me with her azure blue eyes. "What is your new *president's* business, accusing *gamra* of these crimes?"

She used the Isla word for president, as if it were a title, as if presidents were disposable; Danziger wasn't even officially sworn in.

"I apologise profoundly for his actions, Delegate. The man is . . . not familiar with *gamra* protocol."

"Was it not the Delegate's task to inform the *president* of these issues?" Those piercing eyes met mine again.

"It was, and I did inform him, but the *president* chose to ignore

my words.”

A small, cold silence. “So it seems.”

What else should I have done? Why had Danziger cut me out of all decision-making?

“Again, I apologise, Delegate, but protocol aside, I believe that Nations of Earth had some of the facts on their side—”

“Facts? Like the allegations that some *gamra* entity was involved in the disappearance of the previous envoy?”

Shit. Next time I was on Earth, I was going to kick that movie producer’s arse all the way to the Moon. “Please, Delegate, this is a misunderstanding. These are not true allegations. It is a *movie*.” That didn’t translate into Coldi of course, and she raised her eyebrows at the *Isla* word. “A form of entertainment. I will explain this in the assembly, but the most important fact about a *movie* is that it is a story, not real.” And even the word *story* didn’t translate well. “Recount” was obviously out, because it wasn’t a recount or history. The closest other word was *semayi* which meant *fabrication*, and that was too close to *lie*.

“Entertainment? Provocation of *gamra* entities? Is that entertainment? Hurling abuse at this establishment and see who gets angry?”

That just about showed how much of an uphill battle I faced. “As I said, I will explain.”

Damn, I really needed Nicha.

Another cold glance. “The establishment shall await the explanation, then. The assembly sits in five days. That will be the time to explain. Important primary delegates will be in attendance.”

Primary delegates were heads of state of entities normally represented by their envoys, who were secondary delegates. I was a probationary tertiary delegate, someone representing an organisation which represented the heads of state. Not high in the importance stakes at all.

I wondered who was coming to listen to my speech.

She strained her legs to get up, but I wasn't finished. "Delegate, is it known to *gamra* who was responsible and what they wanted?"

Much too direct for *gamra* protocol of course, even though I used the right pronouns.

A small silence. Was she shocked at my lack of manners? Never mind; I refused to be intimidated.

"Regretfully, the establishment has no indication who was responsible."

"Delegate, in that case, it would be wise to send Nations of Earth a formal statement that no known entity of *gamra* had a hand in this attack. I believe Nations of Earth is justified in at least some of their opinions—even though I don't agree with their actions. There is considerable proof that non-local weaponry was used. A statement would definitely help; at least some of the tension would be allayed."

She nodded. "That, it would."

But she mentioned no more. Not that she would send a statement, nor that she would formally deny Danziger's accusation.

That didn't sit well with me at all. Was she aware of some plot? "Please, Delegate, that is my strong belief. The Coldi population on Earth numbers about two hundred thousand. They have become hostages, with my *zhayma* Nicha Palayi as example. Their houses are under attack, their shops are being looted, their families are threatened. They will . . ." I thought of Nixie Chan and her plans for strikes and shutdowns, and of Nicha's father, who must right now be thinking about taking action to free his son. ". . . They are already taking hostile action. Lives are at risk."

"The Delegate can discuss this in the assembly."

"With respect, Delegate, I think action is needed sooner than that. The Barresh Exchange is full of refugees."

Five days? By that time war might well have broken out.

"The establishment is aware of the situation." She made to get up, but sat down again. "Oh—it's necessary to mention—the establishment has appointed a new *zhayma* to the Delegate." She

snapped her fingers.

Someone came to the doorway. Stocky, broad-shouldered, glistening hair with peacock-colours tied back tightly. A face that would have looked carved out of marble if the skin had not been yellow-tinged.

A formal nod of the head acknowledged Delegate Akhtari. I received the same attention, plus a glance of eyes so perfectly almond-shaped I found it hard to look away. “Delegates.”

Coldi. Impossible to tell gender even by voice. A feeling of constriction lodged in my chest. I could only see Nicha’s smile. Nicha, who had grown up on Earth and knew me so well. My *zhayma*, a person close to me no one could replace. It wasn’t *marriage without the sex*. It was more, much more.

Delegate Akhtari acknowledged the Coldi person with a wave of her hand. “This is Thayu Domiri, who has kindly agreed to take the position at very short notice.”

Domiri. There were only thirty-two Coldi clans, and each had a different specialty. On Asto, Domiri spelled security, paid fighters, officers and generals in the army. Nicha’s father was a Domiri.

Thayu was a female name. I met the eyes again; so perfect, they spoke of exotic holiday destinations, of black-lined eyes drawn in perfection on ancient Egyptian papyrus.

She bowed. “Delegate.”

She sized me up, briefly. Her hand twitched. Oh shit.

My legs tensed, ready to spring. This was the moment when dominance would be established, if her instincts triggered.

I saw Nicha when we first met. He’d done the same: looked at me, and twitched. Then he’d walked up to me, grabbed me by the shoulders, while staring into my eyes with unbelievable intensity. He lifted me clear off the ground, and could easily have thrown me through the fifth-floor window . . . and then set me down, still meeting my eyes. It had been a dangerous moment, but I only understood that later.

Rimoyu, balance. Not, as some people thought, a balance of

equals. It called to mind Danziger's crude joke: *If it doesn't eat you, you can't defeat it, can't fuck it, you must kill it.* Only a *zhayma* could be equal in rank. All other relationships had to be unequal, and it had to be established who was superior. Amarru was my superior; my office staff, inferior. I had to constantly remind myself of this fact, and act the part; for a Coldi person, this was a matter of instinct that triggered upon the first meeting between two people. If the two people were completely unconnected through their respective loyalty networks, there could be fights. Nicha said that he had felt something stir when he first met me, even though the instinct didn't usually trigger when facing people from other species.

She didn't move. My heart was still going like crazy, and I was sure *something* had just happened in that look.

Delegate Akhtari continued, "The establishment has acted quickly and placed you under guard. I have consigned the two agents specifically for your security." Right. I had thought as much. "Until we find out who is guilty of this cowardly attack, they will accompany you everywhere outside this apartment."

"This apartment, Delegate?" Nations of Earth and *gamra* had agreed to each contribute a set amount to cover my costs. While the allowance was generous, I didn't think it would cover a third of the cost of this accommodation.

"Yes. Is it not to the Delegate's standard?"

"It is. To the contrary, Delegate. I'm alone. This is much too big for me." I imagined myself sitting at that enormous table at dinner, by myself, facing a dozen-odd empty chairs.

They toy with us. Melissa Hayworth's words.

Oh hell someone was definitely having fun with me.

But there was *mahzu*, calm, control. This was not the time or place to raise objections. I'd have to do that officially. Tomorrow, after I had slept, when my adaptation had balanced and when my hands didn't throb so much and I didn't feel quite so likely to say things I would regret.

“The Delegate won’t be alone. The staff quarters are downstairs, as well as the office.”

“Staff?” That wasn’t part of my agreement either. What did she think I was? A member of the aristocracy, who had buckets of money?

“Six domestic. Six professional. That includes the security, as well as two administrative, a translator and a communications officer. Domestic staff include a cook, two general servants, a gardener and a laundry assistant.”

Were they trying to send me broke?

She rose from her seat. “I will now leave the Delegate to rest. May I suggest a medico should attend the Delegate’s hands.”

She glided to the door in regal strides, bobbing a greeting to the Coldi woman in passing.

I stared after her back, noticing that the apartment door was open and that some people were shifting crates inside. My luggage. So the carriers had been told I’d be staying here before *I* had.

What the hell?

A PERSON COULD, of course, get angry, but claiming unfair treatment was an *Earth* response, and not a very mature one at that. It was something *gamra* delegates did not do. Life was not fair—get over it.

But that didn't mean I wasn't angry.

Amarru had said that my coming would be a low-key event. Of course I knew that a number of *gamra* entities watched my actions like birds of prey, knowing that if Nations of Earth decided to become a full member, if *gamra* accepted the candidature, I would carry a large vote based on population numbers. That I would be someone whose vote might sway matters. But that eventuality needed to hurdle so many ifs that it hadn't happened in the past twenty years, and I didn't see it happening within my lifetime. So why guards? Why twelve staff? Why this apartment? Who was paying for all this?

Something stirred by the door. A mellow voice said, "Delegate?"

Thayu, my new *zhayma*. I was rude to let her stand.

I waved at the seat vacated by Delegate Akhtari. "Sit down. You'll have to excuse me. I'm tired."

She crossed the room and sat down on the edge of the seat. With the stealth of an assassin.

Our eyes met. Hers were so perfect, almond-shaped, the large irises black with a smattering of gold spots. Long eyelashes glittered in their characteristic Coldi green, blue and purple. Her

skin was soft yellow and unblemished, devoid of even the slightest fuzz of hair. Under that tunic, her arms, too, would be completely hairless; I knew that from being with Nicha.

Those beautiful eyes focused on my hands in a way that made me think the dominance issue still hadn't been settled, from her point of view. "Is the Delegate in pain or discomfort?"

"It itches," I said and rubbed my left palm over my knee as if to illustrate the point.

She strained her legs as if to get up. "The staff will arrange a medico."

"Wait."

She froze.

"I would prefer to walk to the treatment bay."

"Delegate Akhtari says—"

"I can walk." The latter a bit too abrupt, perhaps.

She looked down, submissive.

Please, no; she'd decided that she was the inferior party. That wasn't right. That couldn't happen in a *zhayma* arrangement.

Damn, I wanted Nicha back.

And I was fighting myself, and utter, complete fatigue.

"Are you . . ." I made sure I used the polite-you form. ". . . are you fine for accommodation?"

Another flick of those perfect eyebrows. "I have a room off the hall, if that's what the Delegate is asking."

"That is what I am asking. I wouldn't want any assistant of mine in inconvenient situations." Meaning *sexual* situations, Delegate. That simple word, convenience, *imashu*, had a nasty double meaning.

The flick of an eye, a sharp look. Not subservient? "My situation is not inconvenient."

"Good."

Damn. Trust me to slip up in situations like this. I could debate Danziger into the back of the cupboard, Delegate Akhtari, too, if she chose to chuck the formality and faced me head-on, but as

soon as there was a pair of pretty eyes involved, I stammered like an idiot.

I love it when you blush, Eva would say.

Well, I didn't.

My mind worked to dispel lingering discomfort. "It's nice here."

"It is."

"This apartment seems very big. Whose is it?"

"Yours, Delegate. Shall I leave?"

Total misunderstanding. "No, what I mean is: who did I displace before . . . all this happened?"

I didn't even know if she was up-to-date with what had happened to me, if she knew where I came from.

"What does the Delegate mean?"

"Please. If we're to work together, call me Cory."

She blinked at me. Said nothing. Showed no emotion.

I breathed in deeply. "What I mean is that I am a minor player in *gamra*. I presumed I'd get an apartment on the ground floor."

"Is this not good enough. . . ?" I could see she almost said *Delegate* again.

"To the contrary: it's too good. I am not important enough to warrant this treatment."

"Oh." Comprehension dawned on her face. "I don't know. It seems to me that no one has lived here for quite some time."

"How so?"

"The bedding smells stale; the cupboards are too empty."

"Who owns this apartment?"

"I'm not sure."

I had a feeling she lied, but I let the subject rest. If that knowledge was important, I had no doubt I would find out soon enough.

"Forgive me for asking, but I'd like to know how much you know of my homeworld, its customs and its groups."

"Delegate Akhtari has informed me."

What? About all of Earth? "Do you have a background in *gamra*

law?”

She gave me a look that said *what do you take me for?*

“As I said, excuse my questions, but I like to know if we are to work together.” I kept my pronouns strictly professional.

She raised her head, chin up. “I studied law and inter-entity relations. I speak Damarcian, Mirani and Kedrasi. I have completed two years at the Trader Academy.”

Nothing wrong with that. She probably had a solid grasp of the variety of laws and customs within *gamra* entities, something on which Nicha was a bit weak. But she didn’t speak Isla and had probably never been to Earth, and would have no knowledge of the inner workings of Nations of Earth.

“Shall I show you around?”

I started to refuse, but my brain needed space to think. “All right.”

She led me back into the hall, where the mound of crates containing my luggage had grown. I restrained to urge to look for my bag with the infusor. The door was still open, and the two Indrahui guards stood there, unmoving except for their eyes.

“These are Evi and Telaris, and part of Delegate Akhtari’s staff on indefinite loan to you.” Formal-you again.

Both men glanced briefly at me, meeting my eyes with their moss green ones, before returning to watching what went on outside.

I retreated. A person did not keep security from doing their job. Yet I had appreciated their presence, and it irked me that Thayu knew their names and I didn’t. I hadn’t asked; that was not appropriate, but now I knew and I ached to know which one was Evi and which Telaris. I wanted to apologise to them for the past two days. They were the only people in Barresh who spoke some Isla, and their continued presence started to gnaw at me. Somehow, I wondered if they were really as young and inexperienced as I had assumed, and somehow I had a suspicion they weren’t, all of which didn’t make me feel any better. In fact,

in my exhausted and filthy state, it made me feel like a profound idiot.

Thayu went back into the hall and past the luggage crates. I glanced into the darkness of the communication room as we passed. Before I went to bed, I had to ask her to show me how the equipment in there worked. I had to check on what was happening in Rotterdam, in Athens and the rest of the world.

But I desperately needed my medicine first.

Thayu kept going, into the corridor. The shimmering ponytail flicked over the back of her tunic with every step she took. Even her walk had this silent, cat-like quality that I would have expected in an athlete, not in a diplomatic worker.

She gestured to the left. “The bathing room.” It had, I noted with a sinking feeling, a decidedly un-private rolling door.

I could almost hear Eva’s voice, *You undress in front of a woman?* The journalist who had bought my explanation of the *zhayma* concept like marriage but without the sex needed to be given a PhD in gullibility, but I didn’t think Eva fell for it. She didn’t like Nicha because she was unsure of my relationship with him, and she didn’t ask because she was afraid to hear my answer. Did I love him in the same way I loved her? No. Did that mean nothing had ever happened between us? Well—no. When you were connected to someone in thought, and spent all your waking and sleeping hours with this person, what did you expect? Poor excuse, of course, but this was the culture. Coldi didn’t marry for love, and as a result, they found satisfaction elsewhere. To them love, affection, friendship and physical attraction were all pretty much the same thing, *imayu*. They bonded with friends through physical intimacy. They sealed business relationships with physical intimacy. That was all very well with Nicha, because touching a man meant little to me, in that way humans reserved for a special person in their lives. Eva knew that—I had told her many times, but . . .

Whose fucking idea had it been to appoint a woman as Nicha’s replacement?

At the far end of the corridor, a broad staircase spiralled down at least thirty steps. Downstairs, we entered another corridor of another apartment, almost a copy of the apartment upstairs, with equally extravagant mosaic floors, and an equally high ceiling.

A number of people lined up along both sides of the walls, wearing uniforms of khaki fabric with blue belts. I was distinctly aware of my bloodstained jacket and my scruffy hair in sandy curls that had a mind of their own, especially after the dry air of space travel. Half of my former fringe had escaped the clips I used to keep it out of my eyes. Nicha had told me that people whose hair was too short for a ponytail were assumed to have spent time in prison, so I could only imagine what they thought of me.

A woman at the front bowed. Olive-skinned, with curly black hair and dark, lively eyes. Whatever beauty she would have possessed was negated by a bulbous blob of a nose, with a vertical groove down the tip. I had seen this type of people before: they were native to the city of Barresh, the keihu race.

“We welcome the Delegate.” Spoken in Coldi, but heavily accented.

Thayu said in a stiff voice, “This is Eirani, head of domestic staff. She runs the household. Eirani, Delegate Cory Wilson.”

Neither woman met the other’s eyes.

I bowed my head, as appropriate for an employer towards an employee, acutely aware of her gaze on the stain on the pocket of my jacket. “The Delegate is loath to impose.” Using the most formal, most distant of pronouns.

“It is of no matter,” she said, but her tone and stiffness made it clear that it was.

“Please accept the Delegate’s apologies.”

She nodded stiffly—apology accepted.

Not a good start.

After the introductions, Thayu led me to the office, an airy room where two women and two men sat working at desks. Within seconds of the door opening, they had scrambled to their feet and

stood beside their desks, arms by their sides, heads bowed in that submissive Coldi greeting.

In the uncomfortable silence, I walked around the desks, asking about each person's skills. None of them met my eyes. According to *gamra* custom, they weren't allowed to do this of course, but they seemed to like this just as little as I did. They all belonged to the same race as Eirani, the local keihu, and had different local customs, which they probably observed with their regular employer, the owner of this apartment. Customs that no doubt didn't involve bowing and formal greetings.

I didn't like it either.

Next Thayu took me to the kitchen with heavy stone benches and two basins from where steam, and the sulphuric smell of thermal spring water added to the breathless air. In the hall, she pointed me to the lower floor entry, for business to the office, she said, but please notify security if it needed to be opened.

The thought did not improve my mood. I had imagined myself and Nicha wandering through the sprawling complex, strolling through the many courtyards, sampling the eating houses, the public baths and visiting the shops. I had definitely not imagined I'd be stuck in some kind of gilded cage, requiring an escort every time I left.

While we climbed the stairs, I said in a low voice, to Thayu's broad back, "The staff seems little impressed with the situation. I'd be quite happy to—"

She turned, and fixed me with her dark eyes. "The staff are being paid for being the staff, not to have opinions. They would do well to remember that." She charged up the spiral staircase leaving me to stare at her disappearing back.

Bloody hell.

I looked over my shoulder at a soft noise from behind—Eirani.

She bowed. "The kitchen likes to know: would the Delegate require a meal?"

"At the normal time." All my senses were out of kilter, and I

didn't even know if the house operated on local twenty-eight hour days or *gamra* day of twenty-three-and-a-bit hours, but the thought of food made my stomach grumble.

"I will bathe first, if that is possible." Possible, not *convenient*; I was more careful this time.

"As you wish, Delegate."

The formal tone just grated. "Please, if I'm to live here with you, at least use professional forms. My name is Cory."

Last names were optional. In only a few *gamra* societies did they have the same meaning as on Earth. Mostly, they were clan names or regional names.

Eirani only nodded. "I will bring towels soon."

Thayu waited at the top of the stairs, leaning against the wall, her arms crossed over her chest. I stopped, stared at her, seeing something I hadn't seen before. The fabric of her tunic was drawn tight over small but distinctive breasts. This meant she was a mother, since Coldi women didn't grow breasts until their first pregnancy.

Her face remained without emotion as I walked past. I ached to ask her what the problem was, but didn't think she'd tell me in the presence of Eirani, who had followed me. For her part, Eirani ignored Thayu and charged into the corridor, voluminous hips wobbling, where she pushed open the door to what Thayu had indicated as the bathroom.

As it turned out, bathroom was far too mundane a term. After passing through a short corridor that led past a dark cubicle that looked suspiciously like a sauna, but was probably a broom cupboard, I came out into a huge hall. Steam rose languidly off a pool at least ten paces long, surrounded by pavement smooth as ice, and elegant benches, made of carved wood panels and soft cushions.

Eirani followed me into the room, footsteps echoing loudly against the ceiling. She had collected some towels which she placed on a table against the closest wall.

“Thank you, Eirani. I can manage by myself now.”

“The Delegate will wash himself?” Her eyes widened.

“Yes, I am quite capa—”

“We can’t have that in this household. If the word goes that the Delegate bathes by himself, we’ll never hear the end of it. Put those clothes in the basket here, so they can be washed.”

It seemed there was no escape from these women and I was too tired to argue.

I turned my back to her, slipped out of my jacket and fumbled for the buttons on my shirt, but couldn’t even undo them. Rather than letting Eirani help me, I pulled the shirt over my head, releasing a waft of sweaty air. Then I stepped out of my trousers, and as quickly as I could, slipped into the streaming water. Damn, that woman was gawking at me. Next she was going to say something about my relative abundance of body hair. Hairy ape. Yes, I knew I had more hair than most *gamra* men, but that was a subject I’d keep to myself thank you very much.

She didn’t say anything; she only watched.

Soon I sat on the ledge of the pool, while Eirani’s firm hands massaged soap into my hair. Every now and then, she scooped up water and poured it over my head. The waft of mint soap mingled with a faint scent of sulphur.

While she washed my hair, I peeled the filthy bandage off my hands. The skin underneath was red and strained at the strips of tape, affixed almost a lifetime ago by a doctor in Rotterdam. Had he said anything about not removing the tape? I didn’t remember, but I left it on, because it seemed to be holding the sides of the wounds together. I let the water soothe the hot skin and didn’t dare touch my palms—they hurt too much. When I got out of the bath, I was happy to let Eirani pat me dry.

Then I asked her for my bag with—thank heavens—the infusor band. While the dust whirled in the glass capsule, Eirani fussed with my hair. It wouldn’t all go in a ponytail so she used liberal amounts of a gel-like substance to flatten my curls against my

head. She fingered the golden loops I wore in my ears. "Does the Delegate have a family colour?" Nothing escaped this woman.

"Such things are not custom where I come from. Men don't wear earrings."

She snorted; she probably thought as little of men who didn't wear earrings as Eva thought of men who did.

"But the Delegate must have a colour. Everyone has a colour."

"I'll think about that." I rubbed my fingers over my chin, far-too-long stubble making a scratching noise, but I wasn't about to let anyone else shave me. "Do you have a bowl? Could you bring me the small bag I brought when I came here?"

She vanished, carrying my dirty clothes under her arm.

I looked at my reflection in the black stone walls, the reflection of a stranger. My hair, normally soft and curly, slicked-down and pulled into a ponytail which barely tickled the collar of my shirt. It made me look older and more serious and maybe that was not such a bad thing. I was young for my position, and it really didn't help that I looked younger than my thirty-two years. When I attended my first assembly meeting, I would ask Eirani to put my hair up like this again.

Clean and feeling much better, with my hands wrapped in a clean bandage, I came back into the living room. The air still tingled on my cheeks. For some reason, my skin hadn't liked the soap I'd used for shaving.

Tomorrow, I had to go dive into that pile of luggage and find my electric shaver.

The sky outside had gone deep orange and the light from the setting suns silhouetted the plants covering the balcony railing like cardboard cutouts.

Thayu sat on the couch and glanced up when I padded onto the carpet. "You look different."

"You look different, too."

She had changed into a calf-length garment that was a cross between a tunic and a dress, and maybe bathed, but it was impossible to tell if Coldi hair was wet or dry, it was that coarse.

“Not as much as you.”

I shrugged, glancing at the khaki clothing Eirani had insisted I wear. “Eirani says I’ll need to go to the shop to fit my uniform.”

“She is a fusspot, isn’t she?” Thayu had used the Coldi word *yanu* which meant something in between a schoolteacher and a nanny.

“Yeah.” I grinned.

A few moments of silence hung between us.

I thought to ask her what her problem was with Eirani, but decided not to spoil the mood, hers or mine. I had quite enough problems for today. In Rotterdam, Nixie Chan was working on Nicha’s release. Delegate Akhtari was aware of the refugee situation, so hopefully arrangements were being made for those people in the terminal hall. And that poor woman who had been screaming for her son.

It seemed various authorities were looking after these people, and I could take some time to recover my own sanity.

“Dinner’s ready.”

Thayu pushed herself off the couch, and while she did so, the split in the bottom of her tunic parted, giving me a glance at her legs. Muscular, the skin soft yellow . . . and much-repressed memories flooded me of a crazy time four years ago, a time when I had drunk in *gamra* cultures and languages like honey-flavoured liquor, a time of exhilarating discussion and laughter until I thought I would die, a time I would spend all night making love to this crazy, wonderful, intelligent Coldi woman.

Inaru.

How had I wanted her to share my life, but she had honoured the contract her parents had brokered for her instead. A man twenty years her senior, who was paying her to give him two children. I couldn’t live with that. She said of course she would

honour a lucrative contract, that didn't mean I couldn't see her anymore. We could never have children anyway, so why did it matter?

It mattered to me. I couldn't stand the thought of another man putting his hands on her, sleeping next to her at night. It mattered because at that time, I didn't really understand how the network, *imayu*, tied Coldi to one another. I thought I did, but I didn't. So I had given her a choice she couldn't understand: me or him.

For the next six months I'd struggled to keep myself away from the edge of that cliff, from the abyss of work-until-you-drop, of far too much alcohol at night, of sleep medication, yes, even dark contemplations that my life was worthless without her and that I might as well end it. I had sworn never in my life to become ensnared by a Coldi woman again. Coldi didn't marry; I should have known better; I should not have let my heart rule.

Thayu's voice scattered my thoughts. "Hungry?"

A couple of dishes stood on the table. One of the young boys from the kitchen waited to serve.

Thayu walked to the far side and I settled opposite her. My stomach grumbled. "Is this going to be safe for me to eat?"

Thayu pointed at the dishes. "You can eat that, and that, but I would stay clear of the mushrooms."

Yes. Mushrooms were always a bad idea, especially those Nicha favoured. Some of them would kill me three times over.

I let the boy scoop some food out of the bowls onto a plate. Silence lingered as we ate. My memories were harder to dispel. The food was interesting—crisp and colourful. The idea was to pick up the salad with the bread and dip the lot in sauce. Strong and unfamiliar tastes made my ears glow.

Thayu finished quickly and used a bland-looking fruit to mop the remains of the sauce from a bowl. Like Nicha, she ate much more than I did.

She turned her perfect eyes on me. "I believe you don't have a feeder?"

“It was taken from me and not returned.” I cringed at the subject.

“We should look into getting you a new one.” That was a polite-we, the form that meant *I’m really doing this by myself, but I’m pretending it’s a group effort*.

“We should.” And that was the we-form that could mean almost anything, most often used by bureaucracy.

This was an argument fought in pronouns.

I didn’t *want* to think of sharing a feeder.

Yet my job required one, otherwise how could I confer with her in meetings, and—let her in on my memories of Inaru?

I stared at my plate, my appetite gone.

“You want a drink?” Before I could answer, Thayu rose and turned to the back wall, where she yanked at a handle to a cupboard door. “Oops—wrong one.”

Inside the cupboard’s darkness blinked lights in rows. Just a second she held the door open before slamming it shut.

The next cupboard she opened contained a variety of jars and bottles. She took out one, unstoppered it and poured a yellowish liquid in the cups.

Without a word, she sat down, giving me an intense look. I needed no explanation for what I had seen: everything said in this room, or maybe even in the entire apartment, was recorded.

FIRE.

Everything was on fire. The stone walls, the marble floor.

A woman sat in the middle of the room, hands tied to the back of her chair.

Her voice rasped in an eerie whisper, the pained words just outside my hearing. An orange glow bathed her face, which glistened with sweat.

I stood at the door, stroked by a breeze of cool air. I could run to safety, but I couldn't leave her behind. I wanted to scream, *Inaru!* but my voice wouldn't work. The flames licked the legs of the chair, crawling up her feet. *Inaru!*

I reached out for her . . . and hit my hand on something.

Ouch . . . What the fuck?

A sweaty sheet wrapped around my shoulders.

A crumpled pillow.

I blinked against the glare of light to my left. A triangular window. Thin curtains. Benches along whitewashed walls. There was a wooden cupboard, a table, a chair and opposite the window, an arched door.

I pushed myself up, the nightmare slowly subsiding. My arm was wet and so was my cheek, from my own drool. I sat on a hard mattress in an oval bed made from woven reeds—like a giant dog basket. I remembered how I had stumbled into the dark room last night, after almost falling off my chair at the table, how I had intended to sleep only for a bit.

I needed to check my mail, find out what had been happening at Nations of Earth and send a message to Eva, and now it was . . . I scanned a bedside shelf for my reader, only to realise I'd left it on the table in the other room. I groaned. My first day, and I started it by doing downright stupid things. My entire life was on that reader. The staff would be operating all that listening equipment; the staff couldn't be trusted.

I jumped out of bed and stumbled a few dizzy steps over the tiles, almost tripping over a longhaired rug, looking as if someone had flattened a shaggy possum on the floor.

A pile of clothes lay neatly folded on a bench against the wall. Not mine—but the clothes I had been wearing last night. Someone had been in here; I definitely hadn't left them like that. When I tried to pick up the shirt, pain seared through my palms. Oh shit, my hands. Yellowish ooze had seeped through the tape.

I stood there, feeling sick and dizzy, dazed and helpless, with no idea how I was going to do up the fiddly fastening hooks of my shirt without bending my fingers.

At that moment, the door rolled open, the slats clattering against each other, and Eirani burst in.

"Ah, the Delegate is awake."

Far too cheerful. She put down the basket she carried and eased the shirt from my hands. "Let me put that on."

Grateful, I spread out my arms and let her slip the shirt over my shoulders. Her experienced hands dealt with the fastenings. Broad hands, with thick fingers and unusually long thumbs. Her hair, coarse and parted in the middle, smelled of spicy soap.

She bustled to my back, flicked my hair from under the collar. Then she put a chair in the middle of the flattened-possum rug. "Sit down, Delegate."

I sat, my bare feet in the hair. "Eirani, is there any news, from anyone?"

Like Danziger, like Delia, Nicha or Eva.

"The staff doesn't know. The staff looks after the house. The

Delegate will have to ask the young lady.”

With a wide-tooth comb, more gel and liberal amounts of tut-tutting she forced my hair back into the sleek ponytail. A dash of perfume on the back of my neck and she declared me ready to go . . .

Into an empty hall.

I stared. Eirani came up from behind, carrying more washing. “Delegate?”

“What has happened to my luggage?”

“The staff has unpacked it and put everything away.”

While I was asleep? *The staff take liberties*. A brief moment of panic rose in me. “Where is my reader?”

“On the table in the sitting room, Delegate.”

Where I had left it. Phew. I took a moment to compose myself. Surely, I was expecting treason where there wasn’t any. Apartments of high-profile delegates would be routinely bugged, both to listen in and to protect the inhabitant. Little was ever a secret at *gamra* headquarters. Loyalty went both ways. Spying did, too. Nothing unusual.

“Where is Thayu?”

Eirani gestured to the sitting room.

I entered. The two couches that yesterday had stood in a v-formation now faced each other neatly, positioned exactly the same distance from the edge of the carpet, a typically Coldi arrangement.

Thayu sat at the table, in the same spot she had taken yesterday, her back to the cabinet with the spying equipment. A half-smile crossed her face. “Good morning.”

I almost groaned—she looked so incredibly awake. “Any news from anyone? I meant to . . . I’m sorry about falling asleep last night.”

“You were dead on your feet.”

“Where’s my reader?” But I had already noticed it on the cabinet against the wall.

“Sit down.”

“But I need to know what’s been going on.”

“After breakfast.”

An extensive choice of food waited on the table. Slices of bread of some kind lay on a tray, arranged in an intricate pattern whereby every slice overlapped the one to its right. Orange tea steamed in cups. There were salads, and fruit, and a jar of juice.

I pulled a chair back, noting that none of the food had been touched. “You waited for me?”

“It seemed only polite.”

A fleeting memory crossed my mind. Summer breakfasts. Christmas, Boxing Day, New Year. The summer holidays from school. Lazy times, my mother in the kitchen. *Cory, don’t bring half the beach into the kitchen. Have you washed your hands? Wait until Daddy sits down.*

No one had waited for me for years. I don’t know why it suddenly choked me up.

“Thank you.”

She inclined her head.

Wincing, I picked up my cup and sipped the hot tea, which tasted heavy and sweet.

Eirani bustled in with another tray, stopped a few paces inside the door, staring at the new arrangement of the couches on the carpet. Glared at Thayu, redness rising in her cheeks.

To her credit, she said nothing, but came to the table and bowed.

“Everything is to the Delegate’s taste?”

“It is. Thank you, Eirani.”

She pointedly positioned herself so that Thayu was forced to look at her large behind. “The staff will be going to markets this morning. Is there anything the Delegate desires?”

I hesitated, knowing that what I was going to say would make matters worse. “Would the markets have *manazhu*, or is there any in the house?”

The you-drink-that-revolting-stuff look she gave me in response was answer enough.

“You can make it here, can’t you?”

“If the Delegate wants.”

“Yes, I think I would want it.” I used the intimate-I, to indicate it was my private wish, and that she was entitled to think of it what she wanted without feeling embarrassed.

“The staff will have to buy powder and filters.”

“You can buy those in town, can’t you?”

“If the Delegate wants.”

“Yes, I do.”

She nodded, her face stiff, and left the room.

Thayu took a slice of bread from the tray, upsetting the roof-tile arrangement.

“You like *manazhu*?” An amused look danced in her eyes.

She used the friendly-you pronoun, not quite the one I used to speak to Nicha, but the one for speaking to someone who is more friend than colleague.

“It awakens the mind.”

“Not many non-Coldi people like it.”

With morning light glittering in her eyelashes, she resembled Nicha, in the way she ripped the bread, in the way she looked at what she ate before putting it in her mouth. I wondered if it was a Coldi thing.

“I know,” I said, and forced myself to speak in a more professional tone; she *wasn’t* Nicha and I *couldn’t* have a similar relationship with her. “I have a pressing need to use the communication hub after breakfast.”

“I will show you how it works.”

“Thank you. I also need to speak to the office staff.”

“They are already waiting downstairs.”

There was a clock on the wall with a triple face. The *gamra* clock on the left showed late afternoon, and I guessed that was not the time the staff adhered to. The clock on the right probably ran

at Trader time, which I could safely ignore. But the middle one had the local five-point notation, according to which we were in the second fifth of the day. Midmorning.

Silly Delegate, staying in bed for so long. “Anything else on the agenda?”

“The uniform fitter is expecting you today. *Zhamata* meets in five days.”

Five days to prepare my speech. Five days to prevent disaster, unless I could convince Delegate Akhtari to write that statement earlier.

“We also need to arrange to replace your feeder.”

I nodded absently, sipping my tea, avoiding her eyes. Did I hope that if I showed no interest, she would forget about the feeder? It was a childish response, and not one that would work in the long run, but I really didn’t know what else to do.

Could I refuse a feeder? I didn’t think so. I would need to figure out how to limit access to certain subjects, if that was possible—and damn it—Nicha normally did that sort of thing.

In silence, I demolished the bread and gulped tea.

After breakfast, I followed Thayu across the hall to the dark maw of communication room. A few lights blinked in the dark; the glow gilded the edge of the control panel and a cushioned bench.

I stopped at the door.

What was I doing? I might be tired and sore, but that was no reason to be an idiot.

“Wait.”

Thayu frowned. “You wanted to know how to operate this?”

“I do, but let’s set this up properly. If someone is listening to us, I can listen to them.” I could still hear Amarru tell me, in perhaps the third week of my training, *if you’re doing something important, there should always be witnesses.*

I strode through the hall, into the corridor, past the bathroom and the bedrooms. Down the stairs and into the office. Employees straightened at their desks; wide-eyed glances met me.

“Work to do. Anyone here knows how to use the hub?”

One man, in the far corner near the window, raised his hand.

“Good. You can come with us.”

While the man rose from his chair, I strode into the room and stopped at the first desk to my left, occupied by another young man. “You will look after the accounts. There is to be a payment for me from Nations of Earth. Find out where it is. Look in my directive area. You will find a number of documents there. Put them through the translator. I want a summary within two days. Next . . .” I strode to the desk of a young woman who stared up at me as if I were a divine apparition. “My agenda and programs for the next few days.”

She nodded.

“You.” I turned around and stopped at the next desk. “You might want to help him.” I pointed at the man I had told to work on Delia’s files. “I think there is quite a lot of work. Let me know if it doesn’t look like you’ll get it done. Also, the *gamra* news bulletins. Find out what they’re saying and what the mood is about the attack on Perto Sirkonen and whatever has happened since. . . .” I hesitated. “Especially find out what’s happening with the refugee situation.” I still heard that woman’s voice, *Azisha!* If her son hadn’t been on our flight, he would have been left behind in Athens.

Wide-eyed, the staff packed away their other work—whatever they had been doing, whoever for.

I was probably totally out of order, and much too informal, but they would have to get used to that.

The staff take liberties.

Not anymore. As long as it lasted, before someone presented me with a bill, I’d make as much use of these people as I could.

“You two, come with us.” I gestured at the remaining men, both young and lean.

I turned and strode out again. Thayu stood at the door; I swore her face carried an amused expression.

In the hall, I opened the door and told the Indrahui guards to come inside. They protested, but I explained that I had brought two locals to take their places at the door. The young men perked up to be given that task. The guards didn't like it, but I insisted. No one else understood Isla.

Then, finally, with the black forms of the guards, and the assistant from downstairs, I went into communication room.

Thayu slid behind the control panel, and the staff lined up, looking awkward, in a showcase of different *gamra* races.

I pointed the young man from the office to a control panel on a desk just inside the door. "What is your name again?"

"Devlis, Delegate." The light from the projection showed up the groove in the tip of his nose. A local, like Eirani.

"All right, Devlis, I am going to contact some people. I want you to make sure everything, every word, every picture, every attempt to connect, even if all lines are busy, is logged into my work directive area. Do you know how to do that?"

"I do, Delegate."

"When you've set that up, I want you to be an independent witness. Use the translator, and log it as well."

Without a word, Devlis tapped a command on one of the screens and then found a little box somewhere under the desk. He seemed to know what he was doing.

I turned to the two Indrahui. "*Mashara*, come over here and sit on this bench." I gestured to the right of Thayu. "I want you to witness and use your experience with my world to interpret what's going on. Make plenty of notes." I hesitated. "The other thing is . . . your names, *mashara*. I know it's not appropriate to ask, but this is my office, and it is not in my custom to speak to nameless people."

The men glanced at each other.

"Anyone who doesn't like it will be invited to share a cup of *manazhu* with the Delegate," Thayu said.

Eyes widened.

I had to make an effort not to snort. “I believe my *zhayma* is joking.”

The corners of her eyes crinkled with laughter.

Oh, that dratted Coldi sense of humour. “Forget about the *manazhu*. If the staff is so good as to get it, I know it will be precious enough not to waste it on those who do not appreciate it. But, *mashara*, I would like your names.”

The guard with the dyed hair expelled a breath. “Evi.”

“Then you must be Telaris.”

The other man gave a small waggle with his fingers, a sign guards used for yes.

I hoped I hadn’t crossed too many boundaries. Indrahui expressions were hard to read and what little I knew about their culture indicated that they were intensely private people. I’d have to make this up to them in some way.

“Then let’s get to work.”

Thayu indicated that I should sit next to her, facing a sloping control panel with a glowing web of blue lines, like a spider web, and sliding buttons at their junctions. I had seen a similar setup numerous times before, at the Exchange in Athens, but had never been so close to the equipment.

Thayu’s hands moved over the lines with practised ease. The lines changed colour depending on how hard she pressed. Her eyes glanced here, then there. She adjusted this slide, then that one. There was a faint buzz and all around the walls little dots of light sprang into life. A 3D image of the *gamra* logo appeared in midair.

Thayu pointed at a junction on the panel. “This is where you make the connection. Press here.”

I did as she indicated, slid the touch-point right up to the junction.

Around the walls, the small projection nozzles of the imager increased in brightness and the image flickered in the air. Something that looked like the *gamra* news channel.

“Do I have an access code yet?” I needed that to get into the

message board and get my personal directives.

She drew the floating command board to her and typed, lightning-fast. Coldi characters flew over the screen. She waited, typed again when letters flashed. Then she gave me that alert, alive-and-fighting look. Gorgeous eyes blinked. Triumphant. “There.” She was enjoying herself.

I squirmed, couldn’t meet her eyes any longer. If Eva ever found out I’d lived under the same roof as this gorgeous creature, she’d have a fit.

I connected with my reader and sent off a couple of short messages.

To my father: *I am in Barresh. I’m fine.*

To Amarru: *Have arrived. Everything fine. Please check Nations of Earth payment to my accounts.* I paused for a bit. *Do you have lists of refugees stranded at the Exchange?*

To Eva: *I’m in Barresh. Everything is fine. I love you.*

To Nixie Chan: *Please report on Nicha.*

To Delia: *I have started my appointment. I apologise for my hasty departure, but I assure you that everything is fine. Expect my first report soon.* I cringed at that one. I didn’t trust Delia as far as I could throw her, but she was, for the Nations of Earth half of my contract, still my supervisor.

To Danziger: *I advise extreme caution in Nations of Earth actions. Please contact me as soon as possible.*

Seeing as it was midmorning in Rotterdam, I expected replies very soon.

Then—I took a deep breath as if plunging in cold water—the Earth news services.

I linked to World Newspoint first. Across the page, in letters larger than this conservative service normally used, was one word: *War.*

I read, heart thudding, of riots in many large cities. Two deaths in an apartment fire in Paris, a woman and a young child. Coldi, I suspected.

The projection showed image after image of riot squads, of screaming protesters, of young men hurling rocks at buildings. Rotterdam went without city heating. A woman ventured into the street selling old-fashioned electric heaters and was attacked by a mob.

Mayhem.

Danziger appealed for calm.

Governments introduced martial law.

And damn—Elsi Schumacher's body had been found in a bushland reserve in the province of South Bayern. The cause of death was not yet known, but since the body was tied up and wrapped in hessian bags it seemed highly unlikely she'd died of natural causes.

A huge military presence had closed the Exchange to all off-Earth air traffic. Athens was isolated.

World Newspoint displayed an article about me under the title *Betrayed again*. Underneath was a copy of my Nations of Earth staff photo, in which I resembled a rabbit caught in headlights.

As if causing the death of President Sirkonen was not enough, the Union has taken another of our candidates. Following the disappearance of Seymour Kershaw ten years ago comes the disappearance, in similar circumstances, of Cory Wilson. Mr Wilson, on a contract shared by the Union and Nations of Earth, had been scheduled to depart for Barresh earlier this morning. However, when department staff checked on his room last night, they found it unoccupied. No one could shed any light as to Mr Wilson's whereabouts. The hotel reception mentioned that "some black-skinned, red-haired people" had collected Mr Wilson's luggage and paid his hotel bill, but Mr Wilson himself has not been seen since leaving his fiancé's house in the early hours of the morning.

"It appears," Ms Delia Murchison of Nations of Earth said, "that the Union is deeply involved in both the attack on the president and Mr Wilson's disappearance. In response to our queries, we

have heard nothing but silence.”

I closed the article, feeling sick. I should have been there. I should have explained, I should have . . . But what difference would it have made? People were saying I was a traitor, even before I left.

I *wasn't* old school. I wasn't from the aristocracy. I was a New Colonist from a section of humanity no one on Earth understood.

Flash Newspoint presented a different angle on the news.

Mr Zbrowsky, the Polish ambassador, said, “The young man has been mistaken in his belief that these people meant no harm. I had the two of them in my house. I should have stopped them leaving with Mr Wilson.” Eva Zbrowsky, Mr Wilson's fiancée, was too distraught to speak. . . .

I clenched my jaws so hard my teeth crunched.

Wasn't that just typical of Flash? There was no need to drag Eva into this. She had nothing to do with it.

But it was at the Nations-of-Earth-funded background news service Peace Newspoint that I found the most disturbing report.

Following the military blockade of the Exchange, security agencies report an increased activity in high-orbital space activity. The Exchange refuses to divulge the identity of the fleet, but it appears that a force is gathering to counter military action by Nations of Earth.

Written by Melissa Hayworth, whose restraint I found admirable. Had she written *Asto is about to launch a counter-attack*, this might have been all over the news.

I pulled out my reader and fired off a second, more urgent message to Danziger, even though he hadn't replied to the first one.

“Delegate? Muri?”

Someone stirred at the door, one of the young men I had posted outside; he had used the local term for *sir*. “Some visitors . . . here . . . for you.” Interesting choice of pronouns, those informal ones. Not on purpose, certainly. The owner of the apartment obviously

saw no need for correct formal Coldi pronouns.

“Let them in.”

“They . . . already inside. They want . . . see the Delegate now.”

Trouble.

Thayu glanced at me as I rose. “Do you want me to come?”

That was a very intimate you she used.

I signalled yes, appreciated her support, and as we crossed the hall, regretted not having a feeder, because feeders were most useful in situations like this. There was really no alternative: I knew I would have to get one, and deal with the consequences of her intruding in my personal thoughts and memories. And explaining it to Eva.

Five people waited in the living room. Three guards stood silhouetted against the light that came in through the window. Coldi. Armed. Both couches had been pushed back into their former v-formation. On one couch sat a woman and, facing her, a man, both Coldi. I’d seen both of them before, but never this close. Delegates Ayanu and Sishaya, ambassador and vice ambassador of the Asto delegation.

Trouble indeed. In big fat capital letters.

But wait—there were only five. That meant there had to be someone else. Two delegates each with two guards.

Indeed as soon as I walked into the room, the missing guard materialised from next to the door. He had his charge gun out of its bracket and held it, casually, pointing at the floor.

In *my* living room.

The woman, Delegate Ayanu, said, “You accuse Asto of this attack on your *president*? What is your basis?” Her speech, harsh and abrupt, rattled with accusatory pronouns.

Good morning to you, too.

I stopped a few paces inside the door. With both couches occupied, there was nowhere for me to sit.

So today’s business was intimidation, huh?

In Coldi society, she would be my superior, and I should greet

her as such: looking down, my arms by my sides.

Gamra protocol didn't require this deference, but lines between *gamra* protocol and that of the individual member entities blurred often, and if people wanted to impress or schmooze Coldi delegates, they usually adhered to Coldi customs.

Not me. Not today.

I quietly met her gaze, darker than Thayu's. Like a lot of middle-aged Coldi women, she carried a fair amount of weight, with soft fleshy arms protruding from her tunic.

"I do not accuse Asto of anything." And that was a goddamned royal I.

"Then what is this?" She signalled and the guard behind her placed a reader on the couch next to her and hit a button. A projection sprung up.

A sweaty-faced man sat at a table in a courtyard, fiddling with the hem of a dirty shirt. His hair, limp and grey, hung down the sides of his head like bits of greasy string.

With a sick feeling I recognised the image: the dramatic last scene from the movie about Seymour Kershaw. The fake-Coldi Asian man, the fake setting, the Jacaranda tree, the fake gun. The Coldi man shooting Kershaw.

Bang, bang.

The projection went black.

In the room, harsh eyes met mine, six pairs of real Coldi eyes that said *explain*. Thayu behind me was probably thinking much the same thing. She had a right to be angry. They all did.

If I ever met that movie producer I'd kick him all the way to Mars.

"I think the Delegate misunderstands." Back to a neutral I now. "I'm sure the Delegate can see that the attacker is not a real Coldi man."

"Then what is the value of this?"

I glared at the rolling credits.

The movie had been filmed in some studio in Italy and a

number of companies with Italian-sounding names had been involved in it.

“The value of this *movie* is entertainment, nothing more.” Not *story* because that could be interpreted as *lie*. Not *recount* because that could also mean *history*.

“Entertainment.” She snorted. “Surely the people of your world don’t tell untruths for the sake of offending others. This . . . *movie* is a load of propaganda.”

Another word I’d been avoiding.

“It is not.”

She raised an eyebrow.

I attempted to explain. “The educational value of this type of entertainment is not in the learning of facts, but in the exploring of possibilities. It is about asking the question: what if history had been different?”

“But it never happened any different.” Trust Coldi bluntness to misunderstand my intentions. Curse Coldi to come in here unannounced, while I was unprepared to argue my case.

The credits had finished. At the end one single line remained on the black background. *Dedicated to Amoro Renkati*, whoever that was.

Their guard shut down the recording. Delegate Ayanu’s gaze never wavered from mine.

I said, “I agree with you.”

Up went the eyebrows again.

“I am pretty sure it didn’t happen like this, but we need to face the truth: no one knows what happened to this man because his body was never found. This *movie* tells us how it might have happened.”

“You contradict yourself. You just said this is unlikely to have happened. So why tell it like this? It’s a lie.”

“It’s not, because it was never meant to represent the truth.” I would make a comparison with dreams, but Coldi didn’t talk about dreams; they were regarded as embarrassing. They did, however,

have a high regard for history.

“For example, you could make a *movie* about a part in the history of Asto that isn’t clear, or a part where one little difference would have changed everything.”

She frowned, but said nothing, so I went on, “For example, a *movie* could show what would have happened if the meteorite that struck Asto thousands of years ago didn’t wipe out all larger inhabitants.”

“But it did,” she said, her face stiff. And the Coldi race had risen from the ashes, people now known to have been engineered for survival by the race that had inhabited Asto and had spread humanity across the universe.

“Yes, I know, but that’s beside the point. What if it hadn’t? What would it have meant? Say if for argument’s sake the meteorite had been smaller and it hadn’t struck where it did, and there hadn’t been a shift in surface temperature, and Aghyrians had survived in large numbers, then Asto would look very different today, wouldn’t it?”

Her face hardened.

“This is not a joking matter.”

“I agree, it is not.” Shit. Bad move, Mr Wilson.

“Then tell me, why are we talking about this?”

“To illustrate my explanation. Someone tells an alternative sequence of events. A story. Not true. Our culture does that all the time.”

Her face remained hard. “So . . . someone can say just about anything, make a *movie* like this, and then when people get angry about it, they say it’s not real. How do you even know which way it’s intended?”

“By the way it’s presented.” But plenty of people on Earth seemed to have trouble with just this dilemma. When networks like Flash become involved, lines between fact and fiction blurred. Allegations were raised, and never retracted. Rumours spread, and never stopped doing the rounds.

Delegate Ayanu's finger went up a fraction.

The guard hit another key on the reader and the image displayed a copy of the World Newspoint report, with Delia's comments.

Delegate Ayanu gestured at the screen. "This person clearly says we are responsible. She is someone of authority, is she not? Where does she get her information other than from a *movie* you say isn't true? A recount."

"Entertainment, not recount."

"There is *nothing* entertaining about this nonsense. If you are right, why does this woman seem to think it is true?"

I couldn't tell her of the security report Danziger had shown to me, about the red light. "There is some evidence, which I'm not at liberty to discuss without my president's approval."

She snorted. "We had no hand in the attack. Why even should we want this man dead? This *president* of yours. He's nothing to us. He dies, you replace him. We don't care. If we don't get an apology and the Exchange isn't opened so that our people can get out—"

"Delegate, forgive me, but I urge restraint. This is a volatile situation. It is in *gamra* interest to prevent further violence. I'm sure you would agree."

Hard eyes met mine. "No. I do not agree. Asto does not stand for having its citizens held to ransom without reason. We agree to nothing less than a full apology. Convey that to your authorities. If we are polite, we might honour their silly blockade of the Exchange for a short while. However, in order to remain polite, we will need some demands met. Four days. If your authorities' response at *zhamata* doesn't please us, we'll see about breaking the blockade our way."

Before I could reply, she rose and strode out of the room, her male colleague and the guards trotting after her like little doggies.

O H HELL. I suppose that wasn't unexpected. Worse, I agreed with everything she said. Whatever had caused the emergency council to instate the blockade, it had made things far worse than they needed to be.

Thayu came out from behind me, wordless, and sank down on the couch just vacated by Delegate Ayanu.

She folded her hands on her knees and said, not looking at me, "I've never heard her so angry."

I sat down as well, tension rising in me, knowing that I needed to get onto Danziger to make him understand how serious the situation was, and needed to know what the reasons were for the emergency council's decision, and why the *fuck* everyone was stalling on me. I was cold; I felt nauseous.

She continued, "Why are *Nations of Earth* so keen to accuse Asto? Is it really because of this *movie*?"

"I don't think so, but . . ." I shrugged, raised my hands, again on the verge of mentioning the red light. ". . . That is the problem. I don't know. I'm not being told."

That gold-flecked gaze met mine. "Your *president* no longer trusts you?"

I shrugged again, and couldn't meet her eyes any longer or bring myself to tell her how close to the truth she might be.

Taking up Amarru's offer for a flight out of London might have been the biggest mistake of my life.

She reached out to touch my hand in that Coldi gesture of

comfort, but couldn't reach.

At that moment, Eirani bustled into the room with a tray of food. She glanced at us, wordless, volumes of meaning crossing her face. Disapproving meaning, that was.

"Midday meal." Her voice sounded like that of a schoolmistress.

My cheeks burned.

What the hell had she thought, seeing us almost sharing that intimate gesture?

Locals in the city of Barresh didn't marry for love either. For much of the native population, wives were a possession, and although it was outlawed, polygamy was still common. Showing affection in public amounted to loose morals. Oh damn all these different cultures. That was exactly the reason why *gamra* protocol was so ridiculously formal.

I rose from the couch to hide my embarrassment and that damned blush. "I'll have to check . . ."

I staggered back to the communication room, shivering. My stomach churned like I was going to vomit. A thought crossed my mind that there was a bit more going on inside my body than the discomfort of my poorly balanced adaptation—I ignored the little voice of my subconscious. I didn't have time to be sick.

The staff were still at work. Devlis and the two guards sat silent and recorded, listened and read. Translators were going, recorders ran and slotted details of conversations into my work area.

"You have a list of refugee names," Devlis said. "I've put it in your directive."

"Thank you."

They didn't know—they didn't realise—how bad things were.

A message had come from Danziger's office, but it was only from Danziger's secretary, to say that Danziger would reply as soon as he was available.

I felt like screaming *I need him now* but I kept my calm. This reply was better than nothing.

"You can all go and have a break. There's food in the living

room.”

While the staff filed out silently, I dropped on the bench. Thayu sat next to me, silent, while I stared at the projection without seeing it.

“The Delegate is not having a meal?” Eirani stood in the door, carrying a tray with two mugs.

“Not now, Eirani.”

“It is time for the midday meal. The Delegate is thin as a reed eel. Not healthy.” She came in, and set the tray down on the first available flat space, which happened to be the edge of the control panel.

At this, Thayu shot up, “Hey, be careful with the equipment!” She snatched up the tray.

The two women glared at each other.

I leaned back.

Oh. Please. Just. Stop. It.

A bitter scent wafted through the air.

My mouth watered. “Is that . . .”

“Manazhu, yes. The staff went shopping.” Eirani was still glaring at Thayu.

“Thank you, Eirani. Much appreciated.”

“Hmph. The staff will have to show the Delegate to appreciate proper food.” Meaning local food no doubt.

“I would appreciate that, too, Eirani.”

I took one of the mugs from the tray, and drank, gratefully. The *manazhu* was a bit weak, but otherwise rich and bitter. It calmed my stomach. “Thank you, Eirani.”

“There is a midday meal set on the dining table. The Delegate should have a break.”

She bowed and walked out.

“She is right, you know,” Thayu said in a low voice.

“I need to wait for a response from my *president*.”

“Can I sit here while you eat?”

“You don’t . . .” And then realised that if she didn’t know what

it was about, that was my fault. No, she might not know Isla, but translators did a fairly decent job. I sighed. "I'm sorry." I had to put the cup down, my hands were that sore.

I must have winced because next thing, she picked up my cup and held it to my lips, and I could do nothing but drink like a small child.

She was staring at my face.

I asked, "What?"

"I heard people say that you grew hair on your face. I've never seen it." She touched my cheek, gingerly, where the hair was already too long; I could feel it catch and rasp under her nails, and I wondered when the hell my shaver was going to turn up.

When she was so close, she looked like Inaru and Nicha all in one. The soft skin under her ear, silvered by the light from the projection, was very sensitive. Nuzzle that area softly and, if she favoured you, a Coldi woman's eyes became bright, the cheeks, palms and soft skin at the wrists flushed red with desire. Words were too banal to describe what followed, memories of the first time I had witnessed that ultimate intimacy too precious. I had been fifteen, and I could still smell the scent of gym equipment of the sport hall at Taurus Grammar, the feel of the exercise mat under my sweaty hands. She was a year older than me, the smart, witty, politically savvy daughter of some manager high up in the Hedron Mines. She knew about things; I had been a virgin.

I turned my head away; the memories, and the smell of Thayu's Coldi skin, were too much.

She put the cup down. I reached over and pulled my reader to me, shuffling away from her ever so slightly. "I need to sort out my speech."

I didn't know what I was saying, save that I wanted to clear out the confusion.

"Delegate Ayanu upset you, didn't she?" She was damn perceptive to boot.

I averted my eyes. "The situation is serious."

“She tends to bluff. I guess you know that.”

I shrugged. All Coldi bluffed like hell; peacock hair, peacock nature, the conservatives at Nations of Earth would say, but between the Asto ambassador’s rude invasion of my apartment, and the threat posed by Nicha’s father, I had little doubt that the menace was real, no matter how much bluff was involved.

I had brought up the text of my speech.

Nice words about being allowed to speak in the assembly.

Light-hearted paragraphs of the history of Coldi involvement on Earth.

What a load of rubbish.

Everything needed to be re-written, and I was running out of time and out of answers.

I worked hard late into the night explaining the urgency of the situation to Danziger, who still hadn’t gotten back to me. I also sent my agreed column to World Newspoint. While I waited for replies, which didn’t come, I trawled through Amarru’s list of refugee names and after an hour or so, found an entry: Azisha Omi, male, aged four. No other relatives. Oh damn.

When I finally went to bed, I couldn’t sleep. I still had no answers. It was hot, and when I opened the window to let in some air, Evi and Telaris barged in, guns drawn. I cursed at the harsh light they shone in my face, and sent them back into the hall.

I don’t need coddling, mashara. The danger is on Earth, not here.

I slept briefly, but my sleep was disturbed by dreams in which Danziger held Inaru hostage in a ring of fire, and where I burned my left hand trying to rescue her. I woke up, that same left hand throbbing with pain. Yellow ooze had seeped from the bandage into the sheets.

As I sat up, too quickly, my mouth filled with saliva.

I staggered out of bed, tripped over the fucking flattened-possum rug, stumbled through the connecting door to the

bathroom and made the washbasin just in time. Watery puke went everywhere, two, three times, while I stood hunched over gasping in that can't breathe, can't stop puking kind of panic.

Damn.

I straightened; I stared at my own mirror image, sweaty, red-faced, unshaven and dressed only in my boxer shorts. There were dribbles of vomit on my chest. I hadn't eaten much yesterday. I'd forgotten to use the infusor last night; I hadn't needed it.

Damn, I had no time for this.

I cleaned up as best as I could, went back to the bedroom, threw on a shirt, never mind the shaving, and went into the communication room.

Thayu sat at the bench, staring at a projection.

A street in a city. People in uniform talked to a group of others, several of whom seemed agitated by the way they waved their hands, angry even. A row of buildings rose in the background. Pink stone, white sky. Asto, her home world.

A Coldi voice blared in the room, “. . . the groups that demand an answer to these allegations. The Atmospheric Institute has assured the Conclave that nothing unusual has happened. They have equally assured the people on the news channels that rain does occur and has been recorded previously.”

The projection now showed a different street between blocky buildings. In the sky, dark clouds built. Wind whipped sand around corners. Fat drops of water fell on hot pavement. First one, then another. Then it started pouring.

People ran out of houses, drenched in seconds. Children played barefoot in the rivers of mud.

Thayu whispered, “Rain.”

“I'm sure it rains sometimes.”

Her black eyes fixed mine. “It doesn't rain in Beratha. In all my life, I've never seen it rain in Beratha.”

Increased rainfall. Elsi Schumacher. Sirkonen's datastick. I felt for my pocket with the back of my hand, but of course I wasn't

wearing a jacket at all, and I had been wearing the clothes Eirani had given me. I had taken off my jacket the day before yesterday. In the bathroom. And Eirani had walked out with it.

I ran to the bedroom, but couldn't see the jacket anywhere. I couldn't remember having seen it yesterday either. What was wrong with me? I should never have been so careless. Shit, shit, shit.

I ran downstairs. Eirani had gone out for groceries, or so said the young man in the kitchen. He couldn't look for my jacket in the laundry, since it went out each morning.

I groaned, hoping the jacket hadn't gone, too. I told him I wanted the jacket, and the contents of the pockets, back immediately.

He would ask about it immediately. Oh, and did the Delegate want *manazhu*?

I said yes, since it seemed the only thing I could keep down. I slouched back, where Thayu stood at the top of the stairs, tension on her face. "An important matter?"

I glanced at the ceiling, wishing to hell I knew who listened to us. "Could be."

Sirkonen had given it to me as *something I might find useful*, in a meeting in which nothing else of importance was said.

Thayu called me. She stood in the door to the communication room, light from the hall silhouetting her athletic build.

I jolted out of my state of dozing behind the inactive controls. "What is the matter?"

"You have an appointment with the uniform fitter."

For crying out loud. War was about to explode and she worried about a uniform?

"We must also visit the Trader Ledger today to set up your account."

That was true; I had to check if any kind of payment had come

in, in case someone sent me a bill for the apartment and staff. And appearance was going to be important at *zhamata*.

I pushed myself off the seat and almost fell with sudden dizziness. "Let me make myself presentable."

I stumbled to my room. My clothing had arrived there yesterday, and Eirani had put my clothes on the shelves in the walk-in alcove that functioned as a wardrobe. I went in there, found a clean shirt and the infusor band. Got the box of capsules. My hand hovered over the little vials. The top compartment were the ones to increase my body temperature. I was meant to keep taking them for a few more days until my adaptation balanced and my body could deal with the heat without medication. The bottom compartment contained the capsules that lowered my body temperature, and I was meant to have finished them in Rotterdam. As it was, there were two left, and I clicked both of them into the infusor. Maybe they'd kill my raging fever. Damn, damn it.

Also, no one seemed to have turned up my electric shaver, so I took the razor into the bathroom and applied Eirani's stinging soap to my face.

I felt a bit better when I re-joined Thayu, but still shivery and altogether not clear of mind.

"You're not looking healthy," she said.

"Just tired." I rubbed my stinging cheeks, which felt like glowing beacons. I'd have to ask Eirani what had happened to my shaver.

"It's not good to be working all the time." Thayu's face showed concern. "You must go out."

Out. Enjoyable strolls in the tropical air.

"How can I? I've heard almost nothing from Nations of Earth. Nothing from the *president* or Nicha."

"Nicha will be fine." She slid the front door open, letting in a cool breeze and the scent of humidity from the waterfall.

I stopped and stared at her, more irritated perhaps than I should have been. "How do you know that? Do you know him? Do

you know what he's facing?"

She just inclined her head.

I didn't know why Delegate Akhtari had appointed Thayu to this position, with her knowledge of spying and communication. Was I starting to see bogeymen around every corner?

Think, Delegate, be reasonable. The trouble was, I had some difficulty doing that right now. It was hard enough walking. I focused on the guard's back. Down the gallery, down the stairs.

The fitter's workshop was on the ground floor of the hall. Hundreds of uniforms, all with at least some blue, lay sorted on shelves. Tunics, robes, sashes, scarves, trousers. Never had I seen so much blue in one place.

While the fitter took my measurements with a piece of white tape, I glanced around the shop. "What do you advise?" Damn, I wanted to go back and crawl in bed.

The man mumbled with the tape between his lips, "The display rack over there. We have plenty of sizes for the Delegate to try on. If the fit is not correct—" He took the tape out of his mouth; he blushed. "You know, because we've never had anyone of the Delegate's race here before, then we will make changes."

Never had anyone of the Delegate's race before? What did that make Seymour Kershaw? An orangutan?

Come to think of it, I had never seen pictures of Kershaw in local dress. In even his latest photos, his hair had been short. Kershaw had never had a *zhayma*.

I had met Seymour Kershaw only once, at a party organised on Taurus for the swearing-in of the new governor-elect. Earning a bit of pocket money behind the bar, I had taken note of how much he drank, and how much louder his laughter became as the night progressed. A favourite with the ladies, a charismatic man.

Is that Seymour Kershaw? I remembered my Damarcian stepmother Erith exclaiming when I, my father and Erith walked home after the party.

My father had said yes, and then Erith had shaken her head and

mumbled something about *gamra* not being happy with him.

Half-distracted, I pulled a simple sleeveless tunic from the rack. The fabric was thin like gauze and when I draped it over my arm, my skin shone through. Was this acceptable?

Thayu stood at the entrance to the shop, legs apart, hands on hips. She wore a temperature retaining suit, and her silver-clad arms protruded from under her tunic. The fabric showed a slight bulge at her thigh, and a metallic glint.

Monitoring equipment? A gun? Nicha never carried a weapon.

Telaris leaned against the doorpost; Evi had come into the shop, but his eyes were focused on the plaza outside.

None of them was going to be much help in choosing. I should have brought Eirani, for all the hostility that would have evoked from Thayu.

“That would be an appropriate choice,” the fitter said behind me, and his voice startled me.

I held the tunic up, and couldn’t see myself in something so . . . revealing.

“Does the shop have something with longer sleeves?” I was no athlete and there was no need to advertise that fact.

“Yes, there are various other designs.” The man proceeded to pull out four other tunics, some with sleeves, some not. None came with matching trousers, so I would have to buy those separately. Not blue—only senior delegates wore full blue dress.

Bewildered, I glanced at Thayu, but her attention was elsewhere: on a man who walked past her into the shop.

He was at least a head taller than me, carried his height without stooping or looking reedy. His uniform was all blue: a shimmering tunic and trousers in a slightly darker shade. A thin cloak, like an academic gown, hung from his shoulders. His chest and collar bore gold-coloured ornaments.

Not an ordinary delegate, this one.

He bowed, first to the uniform fitter, and then to me. His eyes were brown like beach sand, lighter than hazel and not vivid

enough to be yellow.

"I'm here to pick up my order," he told the fitter in accentless Coldi.

Yet he definitely wasn't Coldi. Too thin, and too tall, his eyes deep-set, not flat and single-folded, like the Coldi, Asian-like eyes. His hair was night-black without the peacock gloss, hanging loose over his shoulders.

"Just a moment. Excuse me." The fitter scrambled to the other side of the shop, fumbled in a cupboard and pushed a wrapped parcel across the counter.

The man took it, gave a curt thanks and headed back to the entrance. When he was almost out the door, he hesitated, again turning his gaze on me.

"Delegate." He nodded at the tunic in my hand. "Delegate, if I may be so impudent, I believe that the short sleeves are out. If merchant Hadri wants to get rid of his stock, he can do so without preying on unsuspecting new delegates. Wearing short sleeves will make a person look out-of-touch. The hem of the tunic needs to be below the thigh and the elbow-length sleeves are very trendy at the moment."

The fitter made some spluttering noises.

I inclined my head. "Thank you. In all truth, I am new and I do not know much about the latest trends." Nothing, in fact.

An expression came on his lips that could be a smile, or maybe not, since I was lost as to what type of person this was. "We all know who you are, and merchant Hadri knows this, too. But you must forgive me. I better introduce myself. Marin Federza." He held out his hand in an Earth-style greeting.

"Cory Wilson." I held up my hands, clumsily. "I'm afraid I'm indisposed. You know our customs?" Most *gamra* cultures did not shake hands.

"My grandfather taught me." He paused and then continued in Isla, "It seems that was a useful skill." Accentless.

One thing I had learned early in interactions with *gamra* people:

never assume that no one understood me, whatever language I spoke. Most delegates were fluent in at least one other language besides their own, if not two or three, but to hear Isla spoken this well surprised me, hell, more than surprised me. Not many non-Coldi came to Earth. Certainly no one I knew who hadn't grown up on Earth spoke *any* Earth language this well. Those languages were of no import in the scheme of things at *gamra*.

"Forgive my rudeness, but you represent. . . ?" Also in Isla.

Thayu scrambled to attach the translator to her ear.

"The Trader Guild."

Ah. Reason clicked into place. Traders travelled a lot and knew many different languages. Now the unusual dress code also made sense. Traders had their own uniforms. The Trader Guild was a government without a country, but older than *gamra* itself.

I inclined my head and went back to Coldi. "Forgive me, Trader Delegate. I didn't realise."

"We don't tend to be loud. We just get the work done."

"You have regular contact with Earth?"

"I've been there, a few times. Interesting place." His face showed no emotion.

I laughed away my unease. *A few times* did not justify his total command of Isla, and I didn't know what else to ask, without being rude for no reason.

Marin Federza nodded at the tunic still draped over my arm. "I better let you choose your uniform. I will see you again when *zhamata* meets. I believe your speech will be popular. A lot of delegates are talking about it."

"I bet they are." Damn that Asto delegate and her pressure.

"I am looking forward to it." He stepped closer to me, enclosing me in a scent of musk-like perfume. "Delegate, I want to say that we support you in this matter that has upset Nations of Earth. If you air your entity's concerns, we will support your vote, if it comes to that."

"Thank you, Delegate."

“We want to solve this peacefully.”

“Sure.”

“I will see you then.” Marin Federza bowed and strode to the shop entrance.

Thayu watched him, the listening device attached to her ear. Her face showed no emotion.

As he walked across the plaza, the realisation came to me: like Delegate Akhtari, Trader Marin Federza was an Aghyrian, the original inhabitants of Asto who had almost been extinct.

I also had a feeling his meeting me here had been no accident.

After I finished ordering the uniforms, Thayu took me to the Trader Ledger. The *gamra* financial organisation occupied a freestanding building in the middle of one of the courtyards. The outer walls made entirely from glass, it looked like a giant crystal cube, strangely out of place in this stately complex with its ochre-walled buildings, mosaics, carved columns, arched entranceways and nary a right angle.

I had been to the office before, but as I stepped into the cooled air and padded onto the soft carpet of the light-filled hall where couches stood around low tables, the whole atmosphere obtained a new meaning. This was the office of *gamra*’s most important financial institution, and it belonged to the Trader Guild. No other entity had commercial representation within *gamra* headquarters.

And Marin Federza, whom I had just met, represented them, represented this entire building with its wood panelling and glass walls, with its luxurious carpet and polished wood tables surrounded by soft chairs; he represented all the employees, dressed in Trader red, a bright carmine, who worked quietly at their desks, modern holo-projectors before them.

Thayu led me towards an employee who beckoned, and then bowed as we took seats opposite the table.

I gave my name and details, and the employee brought up my

account.

There had been a modest transfer as part of my *gamra* advance. Not a great amount. Not enough, I thought, to pay for the accommodation when that bill appeared.

“Is there anything else? I’m expecting an advance to come in from Nations of Earth.”

The man used his eyes to give a command. More figures hovered in the air; he shook his head. “Nothing as yet.”

Damn Danziger. What was going on?

“Could it be that the transfer is held up because new accounts need to be set up?” My first stipend was meant to have gone in at the signing of the handover.

“It could be . . . but in that case the hold-up is at the other end. Any transfer affected anywhere at any of our offices is available immediately. That is our service guarantee.”

I blew out a breath. The money simply wasn’t there. Right—I reordered the six office staff in my mind—I had to reserve one person to chase up the funds more aggressively for a few days. If I had a few days, because right now, I had nothing to pay them, and someone was sure to turn up with a bill.

WE MADE OUR WAY back to the apartment along the tree-lined waterfront. Delegates clad in various amounts of blue sat on benches, quietly discussing or reading. The windows of the administrative offices of *gamra* subdivisions looked out over the marshland. A lazy harvester floated in a field, sunlight glinting off its beetle-like back and the surrounding water. Locals waded through the paddy to load bags onto a flat-bottomed boat.

In the distance, the main island of Barresh basked in sunlight. Pink-flowered trees spread their crowns over the roofs of the blocky mansions of the old families. The white dome of the council building protruded from a mass of green.

The air was heavy with humidity and the scent of wet mud.

I felt Thayu's presence next to me without looking. The warmth radiating from her pricked my skin, even in the bright morning sun; I hovered between wanting to step away and wanting to get closer. If she had been Nicha, we would have touched in some way, one of those wordless Coldi gestures. A hand on the shoulder, a tickle in the side, a pat on the head. Just to confirm that *yes, I'm still here. I still support you.*

I halted and walked onto one of the eating-house terraces, if simply to step away from her, to have an excuse not to touch her, and put a table between us.

We sat down under a large tree, and I studied the branches for listening equipment.

Dappled shadows fell over her face, each with one yellowish

and one bluish edge, an effect of the binary suns. It gave her eyes a soft look.

Those gorgeous eyes. I had dreamed of Inaru again last night. Was this bewitching woman going to leave me in peace?

The guards had stopped at a few benches that lined the edge of the terrace. For security, I guessed. Evi unclipped a reader from his belt and used his thumb to flick through the screens.

A small beep signalled the arrival at our table of a serving robot, a circular column about half a metre across, on three sturdy wheels. The top part swivelled so a screen faced us.

“Any idea about the specialties of this place?” I asked Thayu.

“The chilled juice isn’t bad.”

I went through the robot’s menu, making sure that whatever juice I ordered from the selection was suitable for both of us. Even that simple action brought memories—asking for lists of ingredients from restaurants when I took Inaru somewhere away from the Coldi community. As afterthought, I added two lots of yellow-coded juice for the Indrahui guards, who sat, silent and observant, watching every movement on the terrace.

The robot accepted my code and ambled into the building. Silence lingered.

Eventually, she asked, “Is there a problem?”

I said, in a low voice, “I’d like to know who is going to pay for my accommodation. Is anyone paying you?”

Thayu frowned at me. Her gold-speckled eyes reflected the blue sky. “I get my usual stipend.”

I presumed the money came directly from *gamra* headquarters. “What about the apartment? How much am I being charged for that?”

“You haven’t been told?”

“No. I know nothing. All I knew was that I’d have accommodation, and I assumed that would be on the ground floor.”

“You are unhappy that *gamra* gave you better accommodation?”

“The quality of the accommodation is not the issue. Didn’t you see my fund balance back there at the ledger? That’s all I have. There is no way I’ll be able to pay for the accommodation, and for the staff.”

A frown made her eyebrows bristle. “Maybe someone is lending it.”

“Yes, but whoever lends me accommodation will want something in return. That’s why I want to know whose apartment it is. Who is spying on us?”

She blinked, still frowning. “I don’t know. I thought it wise to make you aware of the equipment. It may not be used for a reason in particular. As far as I know, all apartments are bugged this way. I don’t know who owns the apartment.”

“And I don’t believe that.”

She blinked. “The only thing I know is a name, a local I think, someone who is not in the assembly. The apartment is registered in the name of Renkati. I have no idea who this person is.”

I tried hard, but didn’t entirely succeed, in stifling my Earthly anger. She had known the name of the owner all along. How very Coldi.

“To me, the name alone is an answer, even if you don’t know who the person is.”

A short silence. She looked down. “My apologies, Delegate.” Back to formal pronouns.

I touched her then, lifted up her chin until her eyes met mine; a Coldi gesture of forgiveness. “I said to call me Cory. I understand what you’ve been taught. Only the full reply will do, but listen: giving me the name would have told me that whoever owns the apartment, it’s not anyone I know. I don’t know why I was put in here or even if it’s important, or if the listening equipment is routine, but one thing we do know: this is not a routine situation. I am sure this is not a standard job for you either. My boss was murdered. The person you replace has either been framed for the crime or arrested on the basis of discrimination. Delegate Akhtari

seems to think someone is after me. Every bit of information, no matter how incomplete, is valuable to me, and it should be valuable to you. We are stuck in the same shit together.”

She winced; I had used the word *orro*, meaning the putrid contents of the latrine in army desert camps, drawn from Nicha’s extensive vocabulary of Coldi swear words. She said nothing, blinking several times.

I let out a breath. “Thayu, I want you to find out who this person is, who is listening to me, and with whom they’re allied.”

“I will do that, Delegate. I’m sorry for the misunderstanding. I will try to do better.”

I lifted up her chin again. “I told you to call me Cory.”

She gave me a blank look.

I cursed myself for much of the way back to the apartment. This was not going well. How could I make her understand that I couldn’t, just *couldn’t*, be as close to her as a normal *zhayma* relationship demanded?

Eva would not understand that the reassuring pats on the head didn’t *mean* anything, or weren’t supposed to mean anything, but reminded me of Inaru, or . . . awakened memories I thought I had forgotten. So many things I had never told Eva. How could I not adore anyone whose eyes were so incredibly beautiful? How could I not gaze and marvel?

It wasn’t right. I didn’t want to be touched by her, and when she got a feeder, I didn’t want to share my thoughts with her.

With Nicha, it had been easy. Nicha grew up in London; Nicha understood.

And now Thayu thought she failed me, and this whole mess was my fault. I, who had lived under the illusion that I understood Coldi so well. That I could handle cultural differences. That I could separate intimacy for bonding and intimacy for love.

And I couldn’t.

I wanted Nicha back.

As I stepped into the hall, Devlis ran out of the darkened hub room. "Delegate. Someone has been most insistent to contact you."

"Someone?"

"I don't know who it is."

Danziger. Hope flooded me. "What did you tell them?"

"I couldn't tell them anything. They don't write Coldi."

In a few steps, I was in the hub room. I sank into the chair, still warm from where the young man had been sitting. "Where is the message?"

Devlis bent over the control panel and dragged out the message from behind other projections.

It was from Eva. I knew I shouldn't feel disappointed, but I did. Why was Eva the only person writing to me?

Cory, I'm scared. The press, World Newspoint and Danziger's people are saying a lot of horrible things about you. Ever since you left our street has been blocked off. The place is swarming with journalists. They want information, as if Dad can give that to them. No one in Athens is willing to speak to the press. Nicha has been arrested. Some people are saying how you might have something to do with Sirkonen's murder because you disappeared. I don't believe this at all, of course, but I worry. Now there are rumours that you have been kidnapped in Barresh. Please Cory, let me know how you are.

I stared at the text.

I *had* sent her messages. "*You disappeared*"? What had happened to the contribution I had written for Word Newspoint yesterday?

I pushed Eva's letter to the side and opened the Exchange link.

As I scrolled through the World Newspoint service, my first thought was that they hadn't put the statement up at all. Eventually I found my long letter . . . in the *fucking opinions section*? I linked to the many comments attached to the article, half of which, or at least the ones I read before my eyes clouded over with anger, seemed to doubt the authenticity of my message.

If you are really Mr Wilson, some loudmouth said, maybe you could tell us why these aliens are dictating the terms to us.

Someone else said, I hope the police are reading this. You do understand that impersonation is a criminal offence and that electronic mail is traceable?

I scrolled down further—

No. I must write to Eva first. Tell her that I *had* written to her and ask her if—

Nothing from Danziger or Delia or Amarru. Nothing from Nixie Chan about Nicha.

Who had been blocking my messages?

I breathed out, closing my eyes.

I could almost hear Eva's voice, *Work, work, work. Do you ever think about anything else?*

The truth was, and I might as well admit it, I didn't. I *was* my work, totally committed to the project that had grown from a small suggestion I had made to Sirkonen many years ago. I lived the project, I breathed it. I might be stuck here forever because of it, but if I didn't believe in it, then who else would?

Not World Newspoint obviously. Not Nations of Earth, who seemed to have cast me adrift like a malfunctioning satellite. *Who* was blocking my messages?

I had to answer Eva.

I opened a blank message screen on another patch of air and slid the thought sensor behind my ear. No typing—thank the heavens.

Dear Eva,

That sounded stupid. Delete.

My love,

No. The whole technologically-enabled universe was watching me. Delete.

Eva,

Not ideal, but heck, I'd think of something more endearing before I hit send.

I stared at the blank page. Saw Eva's face as she had kissed me goodbye, not knowing that I'd leave, saw the silhouettes of her parents in the hall of her house, always watching what she was doing. Her street blocked off, her house besieged by journalists. She would be terrified.

I remembered how I had first met her, at a Victorian ball organised by a group of wives of Nations of Earth ambassadors. I had happened to be visiting from Athens, and had been invited along to the matchmaking ball by someone in Delia's office, a girl who had long since left, and had probably had an eye on me and who knew I was looking for a woman after my painful break-up with Inaru had been publicised. Instead, I had become enchanted by the daughter of the Polish ambassador, and had dived headlong into a quaint society of dinners and balls, public morality and abstinence before marriage. Far removed from the New Colonist society of which I had been a part since I was ten. *Ichi* and *ata-ichi*.

Eva, with the innocent brown eyes.

The message was still as blank as ever.

Thayu sat in the corner of the room. A slight frown made the hairs of her eyebrows stand up. Inaru used to look just like that, and then the next thing she'd say something hilarious and break into laughter.

Would Thayu have the same wry sense of humour? I'd seen some of it yesterday.

Damn, I was supposed to be writing to Eva.

What would I write? I couldn't, *couldn't* write her a fake good-news letter. With everyone watching, I couldn't tell her the truth either. *I have no money and it looks like Nations of Earth no longer want to know about me.*

Besides, there was no need to alarm her. Eva was safe with her parents. Eva might be upset by a picket line of journalists outside her house and some malicious gossip, and yes, I knew that was not very nice, but her father knew about potential risk involved in these types of situations. He had security staff at his disposal.

There was no need to say, *Look, Mr Zbrowsky, it might be wise if you kept your daughter away from anyone you call a “chan” for a while. She might be a target for kidnapping.*

Would Asto do that, if they were really involved in the whole mess? That was not at all the style of the Asto military. Never discount anything, of course, but in the history I had read of Asto, their policy was shoot first, ask questions later. OK, so let's just presume they had shot. Where were the questions?

Oh, confound it. My mind was wandering all over the place. I needed to think about this letter, and I didn't feel comfortable with both Devlis and Thayu watching me like cats before a mouse hole.

I grabbed my reader, pushed myself from the chair and strode out of the room, across the hall, through the sitting room. I opened the doors to the balcony and stepped into the hot midday air. The heavy scent of tropical flowers enveloped me. I leaned on the railing, looking out over the marshland that glittered in sunlight like a bath of mercury. A few flat-bottomed boats travelled lazily along the channels between the reeds. For a moment I pictured myself in such a boat. Nicha sat opposite me and on the floor stood a picnic basket. Way out beyond sight, following the currents across the marshes, the delta ended in a sand spit where the water tasted like liquorice and waves crashed on the shore. Waves perfect for surfing. On the other side of the island city, where the escarpment met the marsh, there was a lagoon surrounded by lush forest where water steamed in pools of pink and orange.

I'd seen pictures.

When all this trouble was over, I should find the time to see these things for myself. With Nicha.

A bench stood in the corner of the balcony. A tree in a planter box cast dappled shadows over the wooden seat. I sat down and balanced the reader on my lap. A sting reminded me that I was favouring my right hand today, and that simply picking something up with my left hand required bending the fingers, and that was just too painful. At least I could stop shivering here.

I tucked the thought-sensor behind my ear.

So what could I write to Eva?

I have arrived safely and everything is fine.

No. Delete that. I was not on a holiday; she knew that.

I just want to say I'm fine, and have arrived safely, contrary to what the gossip press might say.

Oh, it wasn't just the gossip press, and language like this sounded too stiff. I wasn't writing a political document. Delete.

Eva, don't worry about me, no matter what people say. I am fine, and starting work here in Barresh. No one has kidnapped me. Not entirely true, but what the heck, I had a start. There are reasons why I had to come here quickly, and in time, those reasons will be revealed. No, scratch that, try again. *I can't tell you why I had to come here so quickly. There are reasons which I didn't know when I left your house. I wish it had been different.*

I have been given a very large apartment here overlooking the water . . . and I carried on a bit about the accommodation and the city, and imagined she would still like to come, but had no idea how that would ever come to pass, or at least not in the near future. Not unless I could convince Danziger that continuing the position would be a good idea, and he didn't seem inclined that way at the moment.

I sat back and read over my efforts, intensely dissatisfied. I was dying to ask her what was going on with Danziger, but that would upset her and would make me look desperate. People were watching this link. The whole section about the apartment felt like crap. The apartment wasn't mine; I couldn't even pay for it. Maybe the people watching the link would get the message and transfer the money.

Wishful thinking.

I concluded with *Love*, Cory and then sent it before I could change my mind. And then I felt awful because I should of course have asked if she had looked at wedding dresses yet, since that would be the most important thing on her mind. It was just

that . . .

Get married? In a madhouse like this?

I couldn't offer the kind of life I wanted to give Eva, and I surely wasn't going to rely, no matter how temporarily, on her father's charity, suffering his *I told you those chans are bad news* looks.

Nor was I going to take a desk job at Nations of Earth.

But to stay here, I needed money. With the code I'd been given at the Ledger, I logged onto my account, not that anything had changed there. As soon as the bill came for this apartment, I'd be in deep trouble. Either I would have to borrow money, or acknowledge that I was indebted to whoever owned the apartment, whoever they were and whatever leverage they would hold against me.

No, I'd best try to pre-empt that situation. I'd look for work independent of my position, so that if Nations of Earth wanted to play the standoff game, I could hold out.

A job.

Surely, *gamra* had a fair share of rich people in need of a translator to iron idiocies out of mechanical efforts.

The Trader Guild for example. I had a vision of myself sitting at a desk, writing a letter. *Dear Kazakhstani rebel leader, the shipment of arms ordered by you is now underway. . . .*

I buried my face in my hands and groaned.

And yelped with pain. It was as if someone slashed a knife across my left palm. For a while I sat there, breathing deeply.

When I looked up, Thayu stood at the door. She said nothing while she came out, crossed the balcony and sat down in the sun, her legs flat on the hot pavement. I remembered painfully how Nicha did this, too, soaking up heat. A very Coldi thing to do. Nicha said it made his body temperature rise by a few degrees. He said it was pleasant. Coldi could drop their body temperature to as low as 40 degrees, but Nicha said that around 45 degrees was much more comfortable.

Sunlight caught in Thayu's glittering hair, leaving her face in shadow. Her gaze flicked to the reader on my lap. "She is the woman of your contract?" We were back to friendly pronouns.

"Yes."

As far as I knew, Coldi female officials who had a male *zhayma* usually had a contract with the same person. Someone like Amarru, whose "husband" worked in permit processing. People at the Exchange had gossiped about their relationship a lot, since Amarru had re-signed for no less than ten years. Heavens above, could they actually be in love with each other?

"Eva is . . . worried about me."

"When does your contract with her start?"

"When I was scheduled to visit."

"After that, would she come here?"

"That was the plan."

I stared at her arms, soft and yellow-skinned, trying to decide if her voice gave away any emotion. I had no doubt she had come into my apartment expecting a sexual relationship with me. Was she disappointed or glad that it was not going to happen?

"What were the conditions of the partnership?"

What a typically Coldi question. "There are no conditions." Other than *do not fool around with others*. "Our partnerships are for love, and for life."

"You must care a lot for her, then."

The lack of emotion in her voice disturbed me. "Do you have any family?"

"My father."

"What about. . .?" I couldn't help my gaze straying to her breasts. She had a child, somewhere.

She shrugged. "He lives with his father."

"How old?"

"Four."

That would make her about my age, counting in *gamra* years, unless she meant four in Asto years, which meant that either she

was older than me or she had been very young when she gave birth.

“Do you ever see him?”

“No.” She gazed out over the marshlands. A muscle twitched in her jaw.

Damn, I shouldn’t have asked.

When I had been with Inaru, I had always felt that our relationship wasn’t serious for her, that Coldi treated family relationships like paper wrappers: useful until you got to the lolly in the middle. Even in Nicha, I had never felt he actually *loved* his mother, nor had I felt Nicha would form a steady relationship with a woman. I hadn’t thought Coldi had a need for this sort of thing.

I had been wrong.

I rose from the bench, and put a hesitant hand on her shoulder. “You have the right to have one more child.” I was not so foolish as to suggest that she contact the father to see her son. The contract was finished; he was out of her life. That was the Coldi way.

“No. My father has already arranged a contract. It’s worth a lot. I wouldn’t have the funds to . . .”

I swallowed hard. That was where my relationship with Inaru had faltered. I could keep her, she had said, if I paid out the other man. To which I had replied that I wasn’t about buying people and she could either come with me if she loved me, or not at all.

And she had run away.

I stared unseeingly over the marshlands. In my mind, I saw her on the beach of a Greek island—I had forgotten which one. She laughed at faces I pulled after eating bits of mushroom from her picnic basket. I could still feel the burning on my tongue from trying just that tiny little piece of red-coded mushroom. I could smell the hot-stone scent of her skin, hear her deep-voiced laughter. Feel her heat on my naked skin.

Inaru.

Had she been serious? Had she thought I was more than a

game? Had she thought because I wouldn't pay, I didn't love her?

What did it matter? It was too late. She had gone to honour her contract. By now, she would have her money and the man would have his children, and I had no doubt that, being from the Palayi clan like Nicha, she would occupy a plum position somewhere on Asto.

And in six months' time, I would marry Eva.

Thayu said, "I came about something else. You asked me to find out about the person who owns the apartment?"

I shook my thoughts free of times I would do better to forget. "You found something?"

"Come and have a look."

I followed Thayu inside. It was a lot cooler inside the building, and cool air stroked my sweaty skin.

But when I sat down, I made the mistake of putting my left palm on the seat. Something snapped under the bandage and white hot pain seared across my hand.

I cried out; black spots danced in my vision. I sat there, breathing deeply.

A hand came into my field of vision. "Let me have a look."

Trembling, I extended my hands.

Somewhere on the instrument panel, she flicked on a small light that showed a wet patch of yellow ooze seeping into the bandage.

Thayu gave me a sharp look. "Why haven't you seen a medico yet?"

All of a sudden, fatigue and pain overwhelmed me. I leaned back in the bench. My head spun, and when Thayu reached past me to a control, the heat radiating from her body made me shiver.

"I'll arrange it right now." Thayu slid an earpiece over her ear.

I sat there, fighting dizziness.

A little while later, she said, "That's arranged. Are you all right to continue?"

I desperately wanted to say no. I wanted a hot mug of *manazhu*,

to crawl into bed and ignore the world around me. But I nodded. “Show me what you found.”

Her hands moved over the panel and dragged a projection forward. “I came across this.”

I squinted at a piece of text. I could just make out that it was in the local keihu language, which I couldn’t read. The translator had made a copy in Coldi next to the original document, and had done its usual job at mangling up the sentences. Something about a meeting. Thayu had highlighted one sentence. *It is said that representatives of Amoro Renkati came to the meeting.*

And a memory came to me.

Like this, with the two names together, I remembered where I had seen that name before: in the credits of the movie on Seymour Kershaw. The same person who owned this apartment?

“This . . . Amoro Renkati . . . is he a local?”

“I don’t know. I checked the population register, but nothing comes up under that name.”

But this person could be an unregistered local, not a *gamra* citizen.

A local, who was spying on me, who funded movies that told lies about my predecessor.

Renkati sounded awfully like Akhtari; I was sure it was an Aghyrian name. The Aghyrian section of Barresh were rich; they were high up in politics, or in business.

Was it really as simple as that? A businessman in Barresh discovers the glamour and money of the movie industry on Earth, supports a movie about a subject that is close to his heart—and vilifies the much-maligned Coldi in the process. Sirkonen tries to stop the release of the movie, and in return the businessman—not understanding the nature of free speech and democracy—thinks his investment is at risk and orders the attack on the president?

A possible motive, but I didn’t think the potential loss of income was serious enough for murder, not by any *gamra* entity’s understanding. But it was a start.

And I had an idea. A stupid and risky idea maybe, but one that might answer some questions.

“Right,” I said, “let’s see if we can find someone to give me paid work.”

If Thayu was surprised at the sudden change of topic, she didn’t show. “What do you want me to do?”

“If you could take down what I tell you.” I cringed, holding up my useless hands. I hated being dependent, but could only get the auto-type feature in Coldi to work through my feeder, and since I didn’t have one . . .

“That’s what I’m for, to help you.” While she clipped on her thought-sensor, her eyes met mine in an intense, almost accusing stare, but she said nothing and calmly took down the text. The lines of curly Coldi script grew in the projection.

Finally, she read it out. “My name is Cory Wilson, delegate of *gamra*. Unforeseen circumstances in my home entity have necessitated that I seek temporary alternative funding. I have completed training in *gamra* law and am familiar with Trader law. Besides Coldi, I am fluent in Standard, the language of my home entity, and proficient in Damarcian, Kedrasi and Indrahui. I am willing to take projects as translator or negotiator. It is my hope that your organisation can help me.”

“What do you think?” I asked.

“It’s very . . . unusual.”

“Anything wrong with it?”

“It’s very direct—for something coming from *gamra*.”

Yes, I knew the pronouns were too direct. But *gamra* was the only place where such archaic forms of Coldi were used. “This won’t be sent through *gamra*. Not officially anyway.”

“You want to send this—to whom?”

“Anyone I can think of. Marin Federza and the Trader Guild and the Ledger, but also the Damarcian master builders, and local businesses in Barresh.” If Amoro Renkati was such a rich man and wanted to keep close watch on me, he might bite; I was sure that if

I were in his position, I would bite. “Do you think anyone will be upset?”

“I don’t know.”

I spread my hands, frustration welling up in me. “What do you do when you’re stuck for a job?”

Her look was blank.

Of course. That didn’t happen in Asto. When Coldi children were thirteen, they went into schooling and moved up through the ranks by completing tasks and exams until they reached a level they couldn’t attain. At that stage, authorities matched their abilities with a position, where they remained for life. It was easy to plan for a government which operated on strict population control.

“Well, I’m going to send it, whether it’s polite or not.”

“**D**ELEGATE, THE MEDICO has arrived.” Eirani stood at the door, a washing basket on her hip.

I stopped my transcript mid-sentence, thoughts of flowing sentences fleeing my brain. For a while, I had almost forgotten the throbbing pain in my hands, since it had become less after the popping feeling, but now, with treatment in sight, it returned in full force. I did *not* like doctors and hospitals.

Thayu gave me a small nod. “Go. I’ll keep working on this.”

I rose, reluctantly.

A woman waited in the hall. She towered almost a head over me, yet held her back straight. Wide but bony shoulders made me think of an athlete thirty years after Olympic glory. An orange robe hung from her thin and knobbly shoulders, leaving bare thin arms with skin wrinkled as an elephant’s hide.

Dark eyes met mine from a face with a sharp nose and high cheekbones. She wore her greying hair in a tight bun.

She nodded a greeting. “Delegate.”

Eirani returned a tiny bow. “There are benches and a clean table in the bathroom.”

The woman gave a short reply in a language I didn’t recognise but presumed was keihu, after which Eirani bowed again and shepherded us to the bathroom.

The medico woman followed me into the cavernous room. Without looking at me, she gestured at one of the couches that lined the wall. “Sit there.” Right. Someone who didn’t adhere to

the *gamra* formality.

She plonked a metal case on the table next to the couch, and dragged the table until it stood between me and her. She flipped open the lid. From within the depths of the case, two telescope arms extended, and lights flicked on at their ends. Then the front and back of the case clicked open and panels unfolded into a working table, while a fine mist sprayed from nozzles hidden in the remaining side walls of the case.

I stared. I had never seen anything like this.

“Put your hands here.” She pointed at the pool of light on the treatment table.

I did so. In the brightness, the bandage looked positively disgusting.

“This is not good. Why not come earlier?” She met my eyes with deep black ones.

I shrugged, feeling both hot and cold at the same time; I had left this far too long and I knew it, but I didn’t need this abrupt woman to tell me that.

From the sides of the medicine case, she unfolded another panel which held a neat row of metal instruments, many with pincer-sharp points that would put a dentist’s pick to shame.

Squinting, she selected a tweezer-like gadget with knife-sharp points.

I focused on the languid steam rising off the water in the bath past the woman’s back. I didn’t want to know what she was doing but, at the same time, I felt a morbid fascination. Just *what* had made that popping sound under the bandage?

She used the implement to alternately pull and cut the bandage away from my palm.

Like Nicha’s, her skin carried not even the faintest fuzz of hair. Yet she wasn’t Coldi.

Aghyrian.

She had all the aristocratic features. The height, the wide shoulders, the straight nose, the high cheekbones, the long fingers.

It was the first time I had heard an Aghyrian speak with an accent, staccato, snappy, as if she really hated Coldi.

By now, she had removed most of the bandage. The skin of my left palm, red and shiny, strained against strips of tape which the doctors in Rotterdam had applied to keep both sides of the cuts together. One had come loose, leaving a raw and gaping wound, red rimmed and oozing pus. The faintest breeze of air stung like acid.

A drop of sweat rolled down my stomach.

“Hold still.” She put one hand across both my wrists and with the other picked up an instrument, with what looked like a small light bulb at the end. *Something*, a spark or a light, flew from the glass bulb. It hit my palms with a sharp stab of pain. It crackled along my fingers . . . and then . . . nothing.

The pain was gone.

“What . . .” I stared.

She gave me a withering look, while putting the instrument away, nothing more than a metal rod with a little piece of glass at the end, a simple thing, a . . . *conductor*.

On second thoughts, I had heard of this. It had something to do with the ability to store energy in the body, like static electricity. All three races native to Barresh had this to some extent. It had a name—which I had forgotten. I had read a report written by someone, a Coldi author I seemed to remember, who was quite scared of the ability, calling it a *regrettable abomination*.

I wriggled my fingers. “Could you show me how you do that?”

“Is not for fun.”

Talk about grumpy. “You are Aghyrian, aren’t you?”

She gave me a piercing look, but didn’t disagree. “Aghyrians are locals, aren’t they?”

“Not by choice, we’re not.”

Heh, my probing had struck a raw nerve. All those years ago, a meteorite strike had made Asto, the Aghyrian home word, uninhabitable for them. Through the ages, the once-brilliant

Aghyrian race had clung onto survival, but only in the last hundred years or so had their numbers increased substantially. There were rumours of a hard core within that group, who believed it was time for the Coldi race, their temporary place holders, a people created by them, to relinquish control of *gamra*, and of their home planet.

Never mind that these days Asto was too hot for any species except the Coldi.

“Do Aghyrians all live in Barresh or are there concentrations somewhere else?”

Another sharp look. “You have a lot of questions, young man.”

“It interests me.” I could hardly say that I was hoping to pave the way for a question about Amoro Renkati.

But I was not to be so lucky.

She picked up the tweezers and proceeded to peel off the strips of tape, releasing a foul scent. My palms started bleeding again, but I still felt nothing.

After another spray from the nozzles, she took an implement like flat-tipped tweezers with incurved gripping edges, and pushed together the sides of the cuts, while with the other hand, she took a pen-like device made of metal, which she ran over the jagged cuts. I could have sworn the metal glowed with a faint greenish aura. Steam rose where it touched my skin, but I felt no pain.

Slowly, with a sure hand, she worked over all the cuts. The metal pen appeared to *seal* my skin and left it shiny but less red.

She treated both my hands this way, then put down the implements. “Move your hands.”

I did. The cuts had indeed sealed together, almost as if new skin had formed.

“Hurt?”

“No, not at all.” I clenched my fist and let it relax again, staring at my palm. It was sensitive, not entirely healed but much better. “Is there anything I should do? Keep my hands dry? Can I bathe?”

She met my eyes squarely. “Hands gone bad like this because you never take bath. Must keep clean.”

Was there a more blunt way of saying I stank? “I will do that. Thank you.”

I stared after her back, realising that during the entire conversation I had not thought about pronouns.

In the afternoon, I received a terse statement from Danziger’s secretary about the military blockade of the Exchange, mentioning that I was one of the individuals sanctioned to enter, from which I deduced that Danziger wanted me to come back.

To my question clarifying if this was indeed so, I received no reply, so I wrote that if Danziger did want me to come back, I would need some funds first.

To which there was also no reply.

Communication failure? I didn’t believe it. Not for this long. I knew Nations of Earth couldn’t communicate with me without *gamra* listening in, and this probably meant, or rather I feared, that Nations of Earth were being deliberately obtuse because they had found something significant.

The news services only reported that Danziger would make a general statement immediately following Sirkonen’s funeral.

I concluded that was going to be it.

Unfortunately, the timing of the statement fell just after my speech.

What if Danziger had found evidence of Asto’s involvement?

There was no reason for them to be involved. If Asto interests had killed Sirkonen, Asto would lose much more than control over two hundred thousand of its citizens. They would lose their standing as a non-aggressive entity within *gamra*. A lot of entities would no longer be happy to vote with them.

Meanwhile, the bullying Asto delegation held a deadline over my head, almost like one of their damn writs. Respond satisfactorily or else. And no one was cooperating.

I submitted an application to *gamra* administration to meet

Delegate Akhtari and to my surprise, was granted a short audience. Maybe the reason I'd given for wanting the meeting, *to avoid a humanitarian catastrophe*, had something to do with it. Maybe not. *Gamra* entities could learn a thing or two from Earth about humanitarian aid in major crises.

And so I put on my new uniform, submitted my cheeks to another round of torture, never mind what had happened to that elusive shaver. By now I was starting to fear I'd forgotten to pack it, and I wondered how that poor abused razor was going to hold out for six months.

Delegate Akhtari met me in her office, seated behind a gleaming, kidney-shaped desk, and listened to my plea. When I had finished, she clasped her hands before her, and said, "Delegate, the situation is stable. Without *gamra* and the Exchange, Nations of Earth forces are not going to harm any other entities, are they?"

Isolationist policies, at which *gamra* excelled. Got a problem? Isolate it and ignore it. I bit down on my frustration. "Delegate, the situation is sliding into war. There is a large population of Coldi trapped on Earth. Asto is readying military to free them."

"They won't be used. The Asto delegation assures that."

"That was not the impression they gave me." Pronouns, Delegate, pronouns! Not such a good idea to use the offended-me in this case. "Delegate, I think the establishment needs to move with some urgency to allay suspicion that *gamra* had a hand in the attack on the *president*, and is willing to help solve this crime. When that statement is forthcoming, I can negotiate the withdrawal of Nations of Earth military forces so that normal Exchange traffic can resume."

"The establishment has been assured by the highest Asto authority that there will be no action until after *zhamata*. The Asto delegation have given the assurance that the Delegate understands that also."

"That deadline is too early. The *president* is to make an important statement after *zhamata* sitting."

“The *president* cannot give the statement earlier?”

Damn. “There are communication problems.”

Her eyebrows rose.

My argument was weak and I knew it. Hell, *communication problems* would well alert her to where the real difficulty was: that Danziger wasn’t talking to me. That I was failing in my job, that my network had broken down.

“I’m asking that my appearance in *zhamata* be postponed to the following day until the *president* has made his statement.” The Asto delegation wouldn’t be happy with that, but they had said *your authorities’ response at zhamata*, which referred to my upcoming speech, but nothing about when that speech would be held.

“The Delegate can plead for this at the sitting. It is not for me alone to decide. I am not the aggrieved party.” That was an offended-I as well.

And that was the end of my hope. Shut up, Delegate, and talk your puny arse out of this. Ask before all the delegates in the very public *zhamata* meeting if Asto—the aggrieved party—would wait. I already knew their stance on the matter. Worse, Thayu sat next to me, listening to every word of my squirming. *She* had ties with Asto, *she* would probably report back to their delegation. Asto would draw the only right conclusion about my relationship with Danziger. Where the spider veins of *imayu* reached, they protected against conflict, but where there was a barrier . . .

A barrier that started and ended with me. And that was the root of the problem.

There was distrust between me and Danziger, between me and Nations of Earth. Not just now; it had always been this way, even back when Sirkonen first appointed me. I was appointed for a political reason: to shut up my father, to shut up Marius Sena, governor of Taurus, and other intelligent and well-spoken politicians of the New Colonist faction, who wanted a greater say in Nations of Earth policies.

When I returned to the apartment, the accounts assistant waited in the foyer.

My heart jumped—good or bad news?

I waited until Thayu had gone into the communication room and Evi and Telaris had shut the door before addressing the man. “Anything to report?” *Let it be payment from Nations of Earth. Let the lack of communication be through technical problems.* Although I no longer believed that.

The man cleared his throat and by then I knew that the news wasn’t good. “The staff needs to pay some grocery bills, Delegate. The staff are happy doing this, but there are not many funds in the general account. Maybe the Delegate has another account he wishes to use to pay the bills?”

Oh the innocence of him. “The account has enough to pay the bills?”

“It does.”

“Then pay them.”

The man nodded and scurried off. I went into the communication room.

I needed to do something, and quick. It was time to start playing tough with Danziger.

It was midday in Rotterdam and Melissa Hayworth was online, delighted to hear from me, she said. I imagined her crouched in a corner in some newsroom, reading her screen while all around her some other crisis was being played out.

Oh boy, did I have a story for her.

I’d like your help. I typed, knowing that what I said here would be on Flash within five minutes. I stood at the edge of a cliff and was about to jump, a point beyond which there would be no way back. Then again, how much lower could my relationship with

Nations of Earth sink? *I am in a difficult situation. Nations of Earth haven't paid any of the agreed stipend as yet.*

Are you suggesting the president has abandoned you?

Sure as hell I was suggesting that. *I would appreciate if you would not put words into my mouth. I am saying only that Nations of Earth is late paying their agreed contribution. I'm giving an address to the assembly, and need information from Danziger. No one is getting back to me about either issue. I'm contacting you as a last resort.*

So you want me to publish this?

Another deep breath. Knowing I was about to jump off an even higher cliff. *Yes. If I can have a share of your payment.* It hurt me to say that. In normal life, I found the selling of news stories morally repugnant, something Flash Newspoint did. Stories circulated about how people wilfully put themselves through newsworthy weird events so that they could sell their experiences. In one word: revolting. But hey, I happened to be talking to Flash Newspoint's highest-profile journalist, and I'd run out of options.

If I did nothing, I'd live in a palace and starve. If I did nothing, the Asto military would attack and I'd never see my family again—or get married.

Melissa came back to me after a short pause. *I will have to negotiate with the boss.* Did I detect a slight hesitation? Time to pull out all the stops.

Ms Hayworth, when this comes out, it will be anchor page news. I want it there. I know you are skilled enough to get it there. I need to continue this job so I can try to preserve the peace. I'm holding off a squadron of Asto fighters who are keen to free their kinsmen and retaliate for whatever has been done to them. You of all people should understand. Her Coldi stepfather would be under pressure, too. All the signs were that she had a good relationship with him.

Another pause, and then she replied, *Yes. I agree. I will get this onto the anchor page.*

Thank you. I have some other things. At the Exchange in Athens, find a four-year-old boy called Azisha Omi.

Any reason?

Ask him what happened to him. It will make a good story. Flash loved those kinds of stories. And I hoped it would get the boy looked after.

Also, the credits for the movie on Kershaw mention a name, Amoro Renkati. Do you have any idea who this is?

A few minutes went by without reply. I glanced at Devlis, who sat in the corner making sure everything was recorded, oblivious to the meaning of it. "Have we lost connection?"

"No."

I typed, *Melissa?*

Hang on. I've got the movie. I am watching the credits right now. Where is this name?

Right at the end.

Another period of no reply.

I see it. No. I have no idea who this is.

Can you try to find out as much as you can about this person?

Any reason?

It will be newsworthy, and if it works out, you can sell the story.

Ha, ha. Funny. OK, boss. I'm onto it.

When she signed off, I balled my fist at the ceiling. Yes, yes!

Within an hour or so, headlines at Flash would scream foul at Nations of Earth. Other news networks would follow. Danziger: one, Cory Wilson: one.

When I turned to the door, I found Thayu standing there, her eyes wide. "You just broke loyalty to your superior?" Her voice resounded with horror.

I shivered, thinking that this was something Coldi would never do. "We don't have those ties."

"No wonder you have so many wars." After casting me a look, not a friendly one, she stalked out of the room.

Meanwhile, I needed to get serious about my speech. The

apartment had no office, apart from the one downstairs, but I wanted some peace and quiet. I made a little work area in the sitting room by dragging a table to the window overlooking the greenery. I placed photos of Eva on the desk and asked for a sheet of the smooth, plastic-like material that shops used for posting prices. It could be wiped clean and reused. The request puzzled the office staff, but I had enough of looking at screens and projections. In that perpetually dark hub room, one could forget that there was a beautiful tropical world out there.

So for the next two days, I sat at my little desk and doodled diagrams and flow charts for my new speech.

The staff worked downstairs and Thayu in the hub. She only came to speak to me when she had a question; and when she did, she reverted back to using formal pronouns. For the time being, that suited me fine. She could do administrative stuff, but for the rest, there was no way she could replace Nicha.

A girl from the office came to see me. In translating Delia's documents, the translator had thrown up some interesting sentences. Some of the type I had seen before when translating Isla to Coldi, others more inventive, probably because some of the language in the documents was fairly archaic.

What, for example, was an *adult school*? And yes, with "adult" meaning just what it did in "adult shops" and "adult movies".

It took me a while before I realised that they meant *university*. Coldi reached legal adulthood when they were seventeen, so the translation had morphed from "an educational institute where students are older than eighteen." Ah. On Earth, Coldi used the word "training" for this, having stolen the Isla tendency to use verb forms as nouns. The evolution of language in action. *Gamra* retained old-fashioned forms of Coldi, which Asto had long since abandoned, while the Coldi on Earth were developing their own dialect. Mechanical translators had trouble keeping up with all this.

Interesting, if confusing.

Melissa Hayworth wrote that she was trying to negotiate the best deal for her article—I guessed that getting it on the anchor page proved a little harder than she thought. In my experience, news services were not so keen to publish material that highlighted major wrongs performed by governments for the fear of losing access to government information channels. She had so far drawn blanks on Amoro Renkati. The Italian studio which had produced the movie had been bought by a larger international crowd, and they—typically—didn’t know anything.

Eirani came to tell me that my jacket—and something that the laundry had found in the pocket—were on their way back. Laundry, she said, was done in the city. I didn’t understand why, when it took no more than ten minutes on the train, my laundry should take days to return, but such were the ways of Barresh. I had other things to worry about.

On the evening before the speech, Thayu beckoned me into the communication hub.

Projected in the air hung an article with a picture of me. The Flash Newspoint anchor page. The headline read, *Is this the way we thank dedicated professionals?*

. . . Mr Wilson has been left marooned in Barresh, with his funds cut off and his assistant jailed for no apparent reason. Repeated attempts to contact the justice department were met with silence. “We cannot say why the man is in custody.” This leads to questions whether the police know anything at all, and whether Nicha Palayi is held as scapegoat. Beyond the initial witness reports, the Special Services Branch appears to be totally in the dark about who attacked the president. If no charge can be brought against Nicha Palayi, then he should be released.

A spot of satisfaction glowed while I read. Melissa had copied everything I said, diverging only by the use of more dramatic words.

In the comments section, I found that messages of support ran about even with racist comments.

He has worked hard for it, one commenter said, We need to support Mr Wilson wherever we can. The Union is not going to go away, and arguments will only hurt us in the long run. Let us have the facts on the table.

Strange how it often took one such show of support to feel vindicated.

The accountant came to report that a payment had come in from Earth, too. It wasn't a huge amount—it came from Melissa Hayworth—but it was better than nothing, and I felt much better. I authorised the staff to pay another bill, for cleaning and clothing.

Danziger: one, Cory Wilson: two.

Even with that bit of good news, the night before the *zhamata* meeting had me lying awake, staring at the vaulted ceiling of the bedroom, repeating sentences of my speech, hoping that what I said would persuade Asto to extend the ultimatum.

I begrudged people like Nicha, who could turn off their brains and sleep almost anywhere at any time. I wondered if Thayu, in the next room, slept just as well, and then I wondered how she slept—curled up with her knees drawn up to her chest like Inaru, or flat on her stomach like Nicha. I could almost see the golden morning light as it used to shine on Inaru's shoulders, and how she would turn and look at me as if she had a built-in sensor knowing that I was watching her. Inaru wasn't *gamra* staff, so we never had feeders, but we didn't need them. In the flat we rented above a restaurant in downtown Piraeus, we had a little breakfast table we would drag out onto the balcony. I would make *manazhu* in a coffee percolator—she'd almost died laughing the first time I did that—and the restaurant owner would bring us hot rolls. We would discuss politics, serious stuff. We would mine the depths of every political movement, place ourselves in the shoes of every bigot and

terrorist on Earth or off it to attempt to understand what motivated them. We would—

I took a deep, ragged breath, dragged my sheet across my face to dry my cheeks.

It was over, damn it. I'd clawed back from that precipice; I was putting my life back together.

Damn it.

I rolled off the bed, padded to the window and peeked between the curtain and the wall. The marshlands bathed in the golden light of Ceren's two small moons.

What should I do? Try to go back to sleep?

Zhamata sat at dawn. *Gamra* schedules ran to standardised *gamra* time, a day of about twenty-three and a half hours, agreed after long discussions between member entities. The Exchange needed a standard time to operate, but no single entity wanted to give up its time, or be forced to accept another's. So in addition to my trouble in adapting to Barresh's twenty-eight hour days, I needed to accommodate for *gamra* days. And people called Nations of Earth bureaucratic.

No, there was no point in going back to bed. I went into the bathroom and decided to have my daily tussle with the razor now, before anyone else was up. I'd had to give up on the soap—it was too painful, but now the razor was getting blunt. It was only a gadget for travelling light, a flip-out, lightweight thing. Very soon this issue was going to come to a head. Growing a beard was not going to be acceptable, so I'd have to find another solution.

In the dark, I went to my little nook in the sitting room and sat down, lit only by the glow from my reader. But the text of my speech bored me; I knew it by heart. I leaned my chin in my hands, marvelling that my palms no longer hurt, and sat staring out the window, seeing myself go into the large hall, seeing the faces of all the delegates—

Deep red light flashed through the sky, silhouetting the trees whose branches just poked up over the balcony railing.

What the fuck?

Heart thudding, I rose and slid open the door to the balcony. A breeze heavy with the scent of flowers carried the faint sound of a wailing siren.

I STARED INTO the dark, heart thudding.

The red circle of light, the attack on Sirkonen.

I expected shouting, panic elsewhere in the building. I expected Thayu to get up, or the guards to come and check on me.

None of that happened.

I strode into the hall—and almost crashed into Eirani carrying a tray with tea and bread.

“Delegate!” Eyes widened.

“Sorry, Eirani. I didn’t see you—did you . . . did you see anything outside?”

She frowned. “Outside? I was in the kitchen, Delegate. The laundry delivery came in.” She nodded at the tray. On it lay Sirkonen’s datastick.

Thank the heavens.

“You haven’t heard that something has happened in town?”

“Nothing has happened, Delegate.”

“No one saw anything?”

Her frown deepened. She set the tray on the table. “No. What were we meant to see?” That was an accusatory-we; she was annoyed.

I began, “There was a . . .” And stopped. The light was red. Coldi had no word for red. They couldn’t see it; neither could Eirani. “Never mind.”

Eirani had started offloading the contents of the tray onto the table. “Eat, Delegate, and I will see if the lady is awake.”

She left the room and I sat down at the table, forcing myself to concentrate. Never mind what had happened. I'd try to find out later. My speech was more important now.

I was halfway through the last slice of bread when Eirani rushed in again, carrying some garment over her arm. She hung it over a chair and produced a comb from her pocket. "Doing your hair, Delegate?"

She put up the collar of my shirt, and undid the clip in my hair. With a few swift strokes, she pulled it back into a ponytail, flattening the recalcitrant curls with gel. She then produced a small box and opened it on the table. Two stones glittered inside, white opals, on golden hooks. "I picked these up from the jeweller's yesterday."

I took the hoops out of my ears and let her put the new earrings in. When I shook my head, the stones dangled against my earlobes.

Eirani brushed the hair off my shoulders and held out the jacket.

I opened my mouth to protest—I'd boil in all those layers of clothing, but she would have none of it. "The Delegate must absolutely wear this. The first impression is important."

No choice about it. For all her grumpiness, Eirani did have an eye for looks. I rose from the chair and studied myself in the reflection of the glass. The stones reflected the light and glittered when I moved my head. White opal, for peace.

I wondered what Eva would say if she saw me now. *Who is that stranger?*

I took Sirkonen's datastick off the tray and slipped it in my pocket. At least that had been recovered. I'd have a good look at it when I came back, hopefully—I took a deep nervous breath—with good results.

"Delegate?"

Thayu came in.

She wore, of all things, a dress, a dark blue, shimmering garment that exposed her shoulders and yellow-skinned neck,

luscious soft skin. Her hair was up in a bun and a glittering stone hid in the hollow between her breasts.

“You look . . . different.” Different? She was gorgeous. Strong, athletic, vibrant, everything a Coldi woman should be.

She inclined her head. Gold paint glimmered around her eyes. “You look different, too.” Her earrings—with blood-red stones, the Domiri colour—dangled against the soft skin under her ears. Both earrings were the same—in Coldi society a sign that she was single and available. Her gaze lingered on my earrings.

I cleared my throat, hoping she wouldn’t see the redness of my cheeks. “You’re ready to go?” Friendly pronouns again.

“Take this, Delegate.”

She held something out to me, in the palm of her hand, something looking like a large and purple daddy longlegs.

A feeder.

“Whose is it?” Not mine; the one I had lost had been cornstalk-blond, like my hair.

“I borrowed it, and set it up last night. Take it, Delegate.” She raised it to my shoulder.

Damn, no. I put my hand on her arm.

She froze and met my eyes. A tiny frown crossed her face. “Anything the matter, Delegate?”

“I told you to call me Cory.” *Please, stop confusing me.*

“Take it,” she said again. “We need it and we don’t want to be late.”

I couldn’t refuse it. I dipped my head and stood still while she eased my hair apart with her warmer-than-normal fingers. My heart thudded like crazy.

Eirani muttered about upsetting my ponytail.

“There.” The device’s legs reacted to the proximity of my skin and latched onto my hair as the semi-sentient material was designed to do. Its “body” settled on my skin with a burst of heat. The infused patch in my brain fired. Connections lined up with long-forgotten threads. Contact.

The stream of thought-noise overwhelmed me. Images, sounds, light, memories all assaulted me at the same time. Information overload.

I raised my hand to my head, half-muttering, *eshi*, retreat, back off, another word that was hard to translate.

The reception range contracted and focused. Familiar sensations crawled through me. The warmth, sharing, the mental intimacy. I met Thayu's eyes, focused and saw myself as she saw me: a bit taller than her, but scrawny and, in the artificial light, incredibly pale. She felt concerned about me, and worried and amused at my impression of her.

What's a "cat"?

It's an . . . animal.

I look like an animal?

Not look like, remind me of one.

Is that good or bad?

But she didn't need a direct answer. There was no hiding the truth. A warm glow hit my brain as her response. Flattered. Much too close, too much intimacy.

I damn well knew I wasn't going to keep this blasted thing on for one moment longer than absolutely necessary. Of course, she could follow that thought as well.

I embarrass you?

Just forget it, right?

She retreated at that, shocked, scared, and I knew I had no right to be harsh. But damn it, damn it. I had *cried* over Inaru this morning. I was *not* going to start any of this cross-species emotional closeness again.

"Let's go."

Much better to speak aloud, much better.

I thanked Eirani with a nod and went into the hall. Neither woman looked at the other, but I sensed they had reached a truce. Thayu protecting me, and Eirani a part of Renkati's staff.

See, the feeder is good for something.

I just felt sick, avoiding her eyes. By now, she would know everything.

Devlis waited in the hall, as well as a young woman from the office whose name had escaped me. They greeted me with polite bows, each dressed in demure khaki with blue pinstripes. Devlis carried the reader he had been using in the communication room, and the young woman's belt bristled with listening equipment. She stepped forward and attached a tiny cylinder to the collar of my jacket. A microphone, no bigger than a pin. Whatever happened, whichever way the vote went, it was sure to be recorded for posterity.

Meanwhile, Thayu had opened the front door and we all went out. Evi and Telaris already waited there, one on either side of the door. Both had changed into formal attire: blue shirts and black trousers. They displayed no guns or other weapons, but both men carried an entire shop of electronics strapped to their belts, arms and legs. Various readers, listening and recording equipment and goodness knew what else. Weapons would feature in there somewhere.

I gestured. "*Mashara*, lead the way."

No one said a thing as we made our way down the gallery to the stairs, down to ground level. We went past the uniform fitter's shop, closed at this time of the day, and out the arched entrance into a courtyard. Faint blue light silvered the trees and abandoned chairs and tables on terraces. Water bubbled lazily in a fountain.

I remembered the red flash and increased my stride to meet up with Evi. "*Mashara*, did anything happen in the city overnight?"

A sharp look. "The Delegate should be assured that safety is not a concern here."

"That's not what I mean, *mashara*. Last night I couldn't sleep, and while I was on the balcony, there was a flash of light and I heard an alarm go off."

Comprehension dawned on his face. "There was a minor disturbance at the Exchange. Nothing to worry about."

Did these men see literally everything in terms of my safety?
“I’m not worried, just curious.”

“An approaching craft experienced a shift. There were no injuries.”

“Shift?”

“It’s a minor malfunction in the Exchange, causing an aircraft to jump a very small distance.”

And now they told me. I’d never liked this transfer business. Pick an aircraft up from one point in space and create a loop of antimatter through space to deposit it somewhere else. The process was supposed to be double and triple checked, but in that moment of nothingness, possibilities for accidents were endless and frightening. What if, through a silly mistake, you ended up somewhere in mid space, and could do nothing but keep flying until fuel and oxygen ran out?

And if the Exchange had something to do with it, why had there been that red flash . . . *Later*, my subconscious told me.

Thayu frowned at me. *What is “red”?*

I’ll explain later.

Evi led us across to the other side of the courtyard, where the entrance to the *gamra* building was black in deep shadow.

Other figures moved in the same direction, all dressed in blue, all different species. There were tall Damarcians, diminutive Kedrasi with copper hair and leopard-spotted skin, black Indrahui of whom only the whites of the eyes stood out. All walking two by two, each delegate with his or her *zhayma*. My escort drew silent looks and civilised frowns.

In the corridor that led into the main building, even more delegates joined the steady stream. Out of side passages, down stairs, they came and merged into the flow.

Ahead, two large doors stood open into the inner sanctum of *gamra*, signified by a carved arch which carried the symbols of the founding entities including the two-sun symbol for Asto. Directly above the door, in the middle of the arch, blazed the five-pointed

star symbol of Barresh.

Under this work of art we passed into the entrance of the hall. Into the dimness, the golden light on the central floor, the vastness of the member stands which surrounded the central dais.

Evi and Telaris peeled off at the door. Thayu led me down the steps into the giant amphitheatre, past benches, past delegates carrying readers, holding up traffic in the aisle by talking to each other. Thousands of delegates were getting to their seats, streaming down the stairs and to both sides.

“Delegate Cory Wilson.”

I stopped and turned. A man was behind me, his flowing cloak billowing over his shoulders while he made his way down. Marin Federza, in all-blues. He bowed politely. Delegates in benches on either side of the aisle looked up. One elbowed his neighbour, whispered something and then they both stared.

Marin Federza drew closer, enveloping me in a cloud of musk-scented air.

“About your request for paid work—I have spoken to the appropriate persons at the Trader Guild and the Ledger.” He spoke Isla.

“Thank you for doing that.” My hopes rose.

“They said they weren’t looking to appoint a liaison contact at the moment.”

Oh. I shrugged. It was always worth asking. “Maybe in the future?” However long I could hold out without payment.

“Maybe, but I did speak to a few others, and there is someone who might want to discuss the possibility of paid work with you. Could I send them your details?”

“Is this within the Trader Guild?”

“My contact is not a Trader, but I’ve had dealings with him.”

“What sort of work?”

“I don’t know. He didn’t tell me.”

This was all suitably vague enough for the contact to be Renkati.

I glanced around to find Thayu, who was wrestling her way back up the stairs, as she seemed to have missed the fact that I had stopped.

“All right, send him the information.”

“Thank you.”

With a polite bow, he turned on his heel and strode down the stairs, towards Thayu. She hesitated, but said nothing. Via the feeder, and her eyes, I spotted a twitch of dislike across Marin Federza’s face as he met her. Her feeling matched it.

You know him well? I asked.

He’s always too keen to please. She closed the distance between us and continued in normal speech, “Did he say he has work for you?”

“He said he might know someone who has work for me.”

“The Trader Guild?”

“No. He is going to pass on my details.”

“Oh.” She didn’t sound convinced, and I didn’t want to discuss the issue, and didn’t want to explain why I was doing this. My speech should be my first priority now.

We continued down the stairs in silence.

About two-thirds into the hall, Thayu led me into an aisle to the left, along a gallery where delegates and their support staff sat in boxed-off compartments, flanked by partitions high enough to shelter the occupants from view when seated. Thayu opened the door to one such compartment. “This is our box.”

Again, this was an unexpected privilege. Most delegates sat in the gallery on benches.

This particular box had three rows of seats.

Thayu made for the desk at the front with sound equipment and screens. My place was in the middle of the box, directly behind Thayu, where a desk light threw a pool of light on the smooth surface of a table.

I sat down, put my reader on the table and slipped on the earpiece that lay on the desk. The holo-screen flickered into life,

displaying the *gamra* logo. Devlis and the female assistant settled in the benches behind me.

I flicked through the meeting timetable. My speech was the second item on the agenda.

Thayu leaned back in the chair, gazing lazily over the lower benches and the central floor, where a spotlight cast Chief Delegate Akhtari's empty table in bright light.

All around, delegates were walking to their seats, talking with each other, silhouettes in the dark—

A muffled shout. A group of about six or seven people had emerged from the entrance under the galleries, the door that gave direct access to the centre of the hall and Delegate Akhtari's chair. Since not all the lights were on yet, they were no more than dark shapes, now going up the stairs.

I glanced at Thayu; she returned my look with a frown, fiddling with something on her belt. Her frown deepened.

What is it?

"Ezhya Palayi has just arrived."

What? Asto's Chief Coordinator was somewhere in that group of dark figures that was now settling in one of the delegates' boxes halfway across the hall? I remembered Chief Delegate Akhtari's voice, *important prime delegates will be in attendance.*

"What is he doing here?" But I already knew the answer: to hear my reply to his ultimatum, delivered to me by Delegate Ayanu.

Thayu answered, *Indeed.*

THERE WERE REASONS *gamra* manners stood stiff with formality. Preventing ugly cockfights was one of them. That didn't mean they didn't happen, though, especially when Coldi were involved. Asto was notorious for its disregard of the conventions, and I was sure that plenty of rules of behaviour were going to be disregarded today.

I stared across the hall, clenching my jaws. *I don't care who he is. I won't let myself be bullied under the table.*

Thayu glanced over her shoulder; she had heard that thought, of course.

Don't. He'll destroy you. I'm serious. The statement brimmed with emotion.

I met her eyes squarely. *Let him try.*

She turned completely in her seat and stared at me, mouth open. I could feel her confusion. I was taking on her supreme leader to whom she had sworn loyalty, and was closer in hierarchy than I realised. Much closer. Something about her son's father, who was a close advisor to Ezhya Palayi, but she clamped down on those thoughts before I could fully comprehend them.

Thayu, is there anything I should know?

The deep boom of the gong reverberated through the hall. People rose. Additional lights flicked on in the ceiling.

Thayu turned back to facing the middle of the hall. I could almost feel her heart racing.

Thayu?

Her thoughts came through strongly. *I support you, and Nicha.*
Very fierce.

It seemed I wasn't the only one to have secrets.

The door in the centre of the hall clanged open once more. Two guards marched out and to the sides, lining up and bowing when Delegate Akhtari entered the hall. The ceiling light glittered off the gold embroidery on the hems of her robe. White hair flowed over her shoulders, a fine gossamer curtain that belied the harshness of the woman underneath.

In strong regal strides, she glided to the dais.

A second beat of the gong and she sat down, folding her hands on the table.

People settled in their seats with a rustle of clothes and documents.

Light dimmed until much of the hall was in darkness and a strong beam from the ceiling silvered Delegate Akhtari's hair.

Her voice rang through the hall. "Delegates."

The last scuffles and coughs died away. All through the audience, little lights indicated screens of readers, gilding the faces of delegates from below.

"*Zhamata* meets on the fifty-sixth day of the second quarter. In this meeting, the establishment will discuss seven items. We shall now turn to the first item on the agenda. Delegate Mavros will report on his preliminary talks into the expansion of the Exchange network to include Ziskmirthar and other geographically isolated areas of Indrahui."

The delegate for Kedras came to the speaker's table. Like all Kedrasi, he was small of stature and almost vanished behind the structure except for his flaming red hair, but his voice sounded confident. "Delegates, the question here before us is a vexed one. The local authorities of Ziskmirthar have applied to the establishment to open a second Exchange node for Indrahui, independent of the main node."

A few delegates in the galleries rose.

A clear voice came from somewhere up in the gallery. “This is lunacy if it is allowed to proceed, after all the effort the Indrahui establishment has put into peacekeeping! This will reopen the conflict we’ve spent years trying to quell.”

People thumped on their desks, a way to show appreciation.

“Language, Delegate!” Delegate Akhtari rang a bell. “The delegate for Kedras will continue his speech uninterrupted.” Her eyes blazed in the direction of the man who had spoken, a black Indrahui of the same race as Evi and Telaris. I wondered if they were listening up there.

At the dais, the Kedrasi delegate continued unfazed, showing maps and proposals.

I studied the text of the speech that had just arrived on my reader. An explosive subject that was sure to raise heated discussions. Indrahui was like the Middle East on Earth—always a hotbed of conflict, and could not settle on a single policy to deal with *gamra*. If the relationship between Nations of Earth and *gamra* broke down, Earth could well end up in a similar manner. Because even if Nations of Earth didn’t want to deal with *gamra* as observer or member, it would be certain that several countries would continue their relations with *gamra* independently. Greece, for example, would never give up the advantage *gamra* had delivered it by putting the Exchange in its capital. Other countries, too, would see the benefit. Countries with valuables to export, or countries that wanted fancy weaponry.

After the Kedrasi delegate had—barely—finished his speech, another delegate stood up on the stairs. The spotlight revealed a member of the race that had once been common and plentiful on Indrahui. Hair grew all the way down her neck as if she wore a fuzzy scarf. Her face was coarse.

They were fighting for land to be returned to them. The newcomers—the black Indrahui like Evi and Telaris—declared them primitive. Not fit to be called human, black Indrahui said, and I wondered if most *gamra* people thought the same of Earth, or

if Aghyrians thought the same way of Coldi, the people their forefathers had created, or of all the other people who could be traced back to Aghyrian origin, which was more than ninety percent of all humanoids. Scary.

The woman declared, in simple but clear sentences that, having been given the island of Ziskmirthar as part of the so-called Indrahui peacekeeping solution, she and her people should be allowed their own Exchange. To which a lot of others shouted that they could not expect *gamra* to pay for this, seeing as none of these original inhabitants had either the funds to travel across the network or the ability to pilot aircraft.

More shouting followed, and inevitably, Delegate Akhtari's ringing of the bell. Her voice boomed, amplified, over the racket, *language, Delegates, language.*

When the noise died down, political opponents put proposals for consideration. The Kedrasi speaker accepted them and finished up by saying that he and his independent negotiators would consider the merits of each and report back to *zhamata* when they had finished. That pleased the meeting; the bureaucratic machine had turned one cog.

Then Chief Delegate Akhtari declared time was up.

My heart skipped a beat, and another one.

She gestured at me.

This was it. My legs rigid, I rose from my seat, grabbing the reader from the table. On the way up to the entrance of the box, my foot caught on a step. I would have fallen had strong hands not grabbed me from behind.

Thayu. Warm feelings seeped in through the feeder link.

Thanks.

I felt that she was nervous, possibly more nervous than I was.

We reached the gallery and turned left to walk towards the stairs. Lights came on in the ceiling to light my path to the speaker's dais.

People craned their necks to look at me, and whispered while

Chief Delegate Akhtari introduced me. I didn't hear any of her words and instead repeated the first lines of my speech in my mind. Thayu walked a few steps behind me, and I felt she was the only reason I kept walking.

Under thumping on the desks, I climbed up, into the pool of bright light, turned to face the crowd and bowed.

I put down my reader and thumbed the screen back into life, all movements mechanical. How much depended on my success here. Thayu rushed forward and attached a tiny clip to my ear. She indicated the screen on the dais. *Turn it up here, off with this control, press it again to turn it back on. I'll be just behind you if you need me.* A fleeting warm touch of her hand, another one of those Coldi gestures.

Thank you.

She gave me an intense look and retreated into the shadow. I could still feel her, though, with me as Nicha should have been.

The spotlight brightened.

It was time.

"Delegates."

My voice echoed in the hall, where nothing in the darkness indicated that at least two thousand people populated the stands.

"Delegates, I cannot say how much it pleases me to be here, and how much of a step forward *gamra* has taken today by allowing me to come here. I am here, and my ears are yours to share, my thoughts are yours to hear and the people I represent have much tied up in my presence here." A formulaic statement that was commonly used. "My presence, I must add, that in the last few days has been given extra meaning."

I waited for it, but there were no protesting shouts in the audience. I took another deep breath, air flooding my lungs like turbo-charged fuel. My cheeks glowed.

"I'm here to mend relations, to forge new ones and to show our willingness to work with *gamra*. It is my strong belief that together, in cooperation, we will be stronger than apart. We cannot ignore

each other any longer. We cannot succeed to our full potential.

“Nations of Earth is ready to talk. Nations of Earth is ready to have all the opinions out in the open, and to determine the way forward towards a fruitful cooperation. Of course, it would be foolish of me to suggest that we forget the past. In fact, I believe we should look at it closely to learn from it so that the same mistakes are not made again.”

Somewhere in the hall a voice went up. “Delegate, let’s do away with all the pretty words and let me ask a few questions.”

The voice was Coldi, the pronouns challenging, and the spotlight had no trouble finding the speaker, who stood in amongst the rows of delegates seated in their boxes. Light glinted off his hair and silver temperature retaining suit. A red sash over his shoulder and around his waist seemed unnaturally bright.

Of course Ezhya Palayi didn’t wear *gamra* blue. If Coldi were bluffing peacocks, this man was top rooster and considered himself above such mundane issues as dress code. He stood on a walkway between the benches, with his arms crossed over his chest, his legs slightly apart.

He bowed to Delegate Akhtari in an exaggerated theatrical way. “May I?”

She waved her hand, palm up in a *go-for-it* gesture. What was this? Delegate Akhtari hadn’t been so accommodating to interrupting speakers in the previous discussion. Was this meant to be some sort of retribution for how I had tried to push her into postponing my address?

Keep calm, Thayu sent me.

Ezhya Palayi bowed again, now to me.

I remained straight backed, no matter how much I felt that a small bow would be polite, no matter how much I was determined not to provoke him. I was determined to play this by *gamra* rules.

In the deathly silence in the hall, he stalked across the floor in powerful strides, between rows of delegates, in my direction. His face remained without emotion.

“Delegate. Our newest delegate, who comes here with noble words, but whose words do not match his actions.” His speech rattled with accusatory pronouns.

I kept my face equally emotionless. No one in the hall made a sound.

“I take it that all present have heard of the two-facedness of this Delegate’s world, how his leader makes baseless accusations, while he sends his delegate to us pretending to be peaceful? I take it that *zhamata* has heard that Delegate’s entity accuses *gamra* interests for the disappearance of their previous delegate? Worse, that *gamra* assassins have killed their leader?” Although he had every right to use those royal-I pronouns, they rankled. What right did this man have to hijack time allocated to me? What right did he have—

“Thank you, Delegate. I was going to address those subjects in my speech.”

A few people snorted. I didn’t think it was funny at all—in fact I was going to kick the movie producer’s arse all the way to Jupiter.

I continued, “I should perhaps point out to the Delegate, and others in this assembly who are of the same mind, that there have been no official statements appropriating blame.” Goddamned royal-I in return. The level of murmur in the audience increased. “I should also point out that until a proper investigation comes up with a result, I am not laying the blame for the murder of my *president* with anyone and it is unwise for any entities to do so.” I met the man’s eyes squarely, acutely aware that it was very much against Coldi custom to do so. He expected me to behave as subordinate, because everyone else did.

Ezhya Palayi returned the stare. “Yet, your *president* has closed the Exchange and, therefore, he is laying blame.”

“The *president* of Nations of Earth is trying to sort out what has happened. I have cautioned him against speaking out too clearly.” Never mind that Danziger wasn’t listening. “I understand why he

makes allegations of *gamra* involvement.”

“A correction, Delegate, he makes allegations of Coldi involvement.”

“The people of my entity make that specific allegation, not the *president*.”

Another voice came from somewhere to my right. “Is that because when your people look around, all they see is Coldi?”

Ezhya Palayi’s withering gaze found the speaker, a dark Indrahui, at the same time the spotlight did. “What do you imply by that, Delegate?”

This man, too, returned the Asto leader’s gaze squarely. “I refer to rule 91-473 of *gamra*, that in order to remain in the network, no entity shall annex another, either by force or by stealth.”

Oof, that was a direct hit. I could feel Thayu recoil. Of course Asto was being accused of doing just that on Earth.

Someone yelled from the back of the hall, “Slander!”

More shouts broke out.

Ezhya Palayi glared at the man. “Delegate, this allegation seems a little ironic. Aren’t your people at Indrahui doing just that—annexing another people’s land?”

Now an avalanche of shouts burst from all sides of the hall.

Delegate Akhtari rang the bell. “Language, Delegates, language!” When the level of noise had fallen, she continued, “The establishment shall conduct this meeting in orderly fashion and not roam off topic. Sit down.” She glared at Ezhya Palayi. “*All* delegates.”

He slowly unfolded his arms and sank behind the partition of the nearest delegate’s box, all without apparent emotion. The regular occupants of the box stared at him.

I continued, “I assure *zhamata* that if my entity has been invaded or annexed, my people do not know about it.”

More snorts rose from the audience, this time from the Coldi delegates.

“I have prepared, as several delegates have requested, a brief

outline of the history of *gamra* interests in my world.” I quickly substituted *gamra* for “Coldi”, but the history was exclusively Coldi. Yet I refused to believe in the invasion by stealth theory. The first Coldi settlers had been refugees from an oppressive regime, with little more in common than a desire for freedom and to be as inconspicuous as possible. They had cut their ties with Asto and were as remote from the regime as I was from the old generation diplomats of Nations of Earth.

“Meanwhile, *gamra* must act decisively.” I continued and turned to Ezhya Palayi. “The *president* of Nations of Earth may have poor manners in this assembly’s view, but their laws work differently. The authorities have decreed that no force must be spared to find the people responsible for the murder of the *president*. The investigation will be conducted by military forces.” Of course I meant *police* but Coldi had no such word, having little need for internal law enforcement, because their loyalty networks already dealt with crimes, brutally so. “Their laws require no official accusation to suspected individuals before their arrest. They do not use writs and ultimatums. According to their law, people will be taken into custody without opportunity to prove themselves innocent; people have *already* been taken into custody.”

“So,” Ezhya Palayi continued. He had risen to his feet again. “Your *president* accuses us specifically.”

Delegate Akhtari shot him a sharp look. “This has already been said.”

“I repeat it, because the assembly has a right to know why this accusation was made. In fact, our delegation has made it clear we expect an answer today.” Accusatory pronouns now. “So tell me now, Delegate, and show us all the proof. Why is your silly and ineffective *Nations of Earth* accusing *us* of this deed?”

Here it was, and oh, that *us* was polemic. Delegate Akhtari picked up the bell—

Thayu recoiled—

I gripped the edges of the dais. He was not going to bully me. “I

am not at liberty to discuss the investigation.”

“That’s because you don’t know.” Accusatory-you. “There is no evidence.”

“Language!” Delegate Akhtari’s sharp voice boomed through the hall.

Ezhya Palayi spread his hands in a melodramatic gesture of protest. “This man here does not answer our questions. How can we deny what we’re supposed to have done if there is no official accusation? If there is no proof?”

“That is why I have appealed for this discussion to be delayed.” I turned to Delegate Akhtari. “Meanwhile, I think it would be beneficial, Delegate, if the establishment sign a statement for our *president* that no entity with *gamra*, including Asto, is responsible.”

“I propose a vote on that,” someone shouted.

Many thumped on the desks, not entirely for the right reasons, I feared. They thought Asto was guilty, and by demanding a vote, they would force Asto either to admit guilt, or to lie, and both had deep consequences for an entity’s entitlements within *gamra*.

Delegate Akhtari rang her bell. “Quiet, Delegates, quiet!”

Ezhya Palayi harrumphed, but gave a single nod and sat down. “We will have no trouble writing such a statement.” Anger oozed from those words. “Asto votes that it be sent as soon as possible.”

There was some cheering in the back of the hall, and some grumbling, but no one said out loud that they thought Asto *did* have a hand in killing Sirkonen. This vote would put that issue to bed as well, I was sure, because whatever was said, I could see no way in which Asto would profit from a strike at Sirkonen, and many ways in which it would lose.

Delegate Akhtari rang her bell. “Is the establishment then in agreement to take a vote on this issue?”

There was a lot of murmuring, but no protests.

“Also note that by voting positive, Delegates will swear that their represented entity has no official involvement.”

The desk screen in the dais went black. In golden letters flashed

the text, *Gamra Eysh' zhamadata should send a statement denying all involvement of the establishment and its members in the murder of the leader of Nations of Earth.*

Underneath the question, clearly marked, each in its own box, were the two choices, *for* or *against*.

I pressed *for* in my first-ever vote, one that would seal my own future. I cast glances around the hall, as if to spy what others were voting, but of course couldn't see from my position at the speaking dais.

The level of murmur rose again, until Delegate Akhtari rang the bell. "Three hundred and two delegates voted positive; five delegates negative. The vote is carried in favour of the positive. The establishment will arrange for a statement to be sent."

I blew out a breath of relief. I could find out later who the five *nay* voters were, but I half suspected they voted against the majority out of belligerence.

The important one—Asto—had voted yes. That's what mattered most to me. I didn't know if that meant the attack on the Exchange was off, but the ball was back in Nations of Earth's court.

Next it was time for my historical presentation, which went well enough. I was so busy watching reactions that I stuffed up on some of the tables, but I doubted anyone noticed.

"You're a fool," Thayu whispered to me when we walked back up to our box. "But a fool who defended himself well."

I didn't miss the tinge of admiration in her voice.

"Sometimes you just need to take a risk," I said.

Our eyes met longer than necessary.

Next on the agenda were some technical discussions about improvements to the Exchange network, then a proposed amendment to the official definition of the term "refugee", followed by a lengthy argument about raising prices for transfers.

Ezhya Palayi left halfway through this discussion, surrounded

by the solid, maroon-and-silver figures of his bodyguards.

Yes, he had indeed come for me.

Thayu and I, Devlis and the female assistant went back to the apartment after the sitting concluded, collecting Evi and Telaris at the door. By now it was almost midday and sunlight beat down on courtyards, casting harsh, double-edged shadows on pavements and tables. Not having eaten since before dawn, I felt dizzy.

As soon as we came into the door, a mouth-watering smell of baked bread, hearty soup and smoked fish tortured me. A glimpse into the sitting room revealed a veritable feast on the table.

I turned to Thayu. "Go inside. I'll quickly check the messages." Maybe Melissa had written, or Eva. Danziger's statement wouldn't be made until later tonight.

You work too hard.

And now she was starting to sound like Eva.

I grumbled a deliberately vague response, and as I went into the communication room, I raked my hand through my hair. The "legs" of the feeder latched onto my fingers, allowing me to pull the device clear of the skin.

A switch turned in my head. Off. Blissful silence. No more interference with my thoughts. No more accidentally stumbling into hers.

I was in the mood for a long letter from Eva, full of trivialities about wedding dresses and guest lists, but when I had slipped into the chair behind the control panel of the communication hub, the first thing that came up was a message from the secretary to the president of Nations of Earth, very official looking, with the Nations of Earth symbol and a picture of the assembly hall with its grand columns and marble steps.

The main content of the message, however, was from Danziger, written last night. Oh damn. I'd spent four days waiting for this. Couldn't he have sent this a few hours earlier?

Mr Wilson,

I have been most disconcerted with allegations raised by you in

your article at Flash Newspoint.

In response, I want to make a number of things clear to you.

Nations of Earth have not cut your funding and have not isolated you or interfered in your communication. While it is true that a number of countries, as well as the emergency council, wished your position to be cancelled, this vote did not pass in the general assembly.

More importantly, and I will be making an official statement about this later today, upon occupying late President Sirkonen's office I uncovered a number of documents relating to the matters you have been studying, or so Ms Murchison tells me, namely the history of Coldi involvement in Earth matters.

In doing so, I have come upon some material that I find downright disturbing. There is evidence of serious plans to relocate a large part of Asto's population to Earth. We have detailed technical drawings of a string of settlements planned for the northern and western fringe of the Sahara Desert. I send you this material which I have presented to the emergency council and which was received with utmost concern. There is absolutely no evidence that governments of concerned countries on Earth were ever consulted. I do not take a positive view of this material. It seems to me that those who have claimed danger of an invasion have been right.

In response to this, the general assembly has voted for you to be recalled. I have arranged for funding for your immediate return to Rotterdam.

Sigobert Danziger, Acting President, Nations of Earth.

I OPENED UP the documents that had come with Danziger's letter.

Street plans, buildings, satellite photos of an area in the Sahara with the outlines of the plan drawn in. Huge complexes of units. Accommodation for thousands, tens, hundreds of thousands of people. Detailed plans with explanations in Coldi.

My heart thudded in my throat. Wherever did this come from? How had it fallen into Sirkonen's hands? I looked for information, a name, a date on the document, but found none. Instead, there were balance sheets of costs, including a plan for transporting a huge number of people across the Mediterranean unnoticed. They even had damned security.

Oh, shit.

Whichever way I looked at it, a large-scale Coldi migration to a poor African country which had probably been paid for the land without the knowledge of Nations of Earth amounted to an invasion. A silent, peaceful invasion, but an invasion nevertheless. Exactly the sort of thing people had feared. Present this in the emergency council, and representatives would go ballistic, which was what they had done.

Closed the Exchange.

Limited off-Earth communication.

Yet why had no one told me about this?

Because you're so far in bed with the enemy, Delegate, you don't know which is the right door out of the bedroom. Or so had Eva's

father said not so long ago, in one of our heated discussions.

I'd known about Asto's bugs in electronic surveillance. I'd judged them benign.

And it seemed I had been very, very wrong.

Meanwhile I'd spent a large part of my speech this morning defending Asto's innocence? And Ezhya Palayi accused me of double standards while at the same time he said he would vote—wait.

I brought up the *gamra* link, with the results of this morning's voting. I was right, Asto *had* voted for making the statement that no entity of *gamra* was involved, including Asto. That meant that they were in breach of *gamra* law. My fingers trembling with anger, I opened up a blank message. I was going to—

No. Telling Delegate Akhtari would solve nothing; she was a bureaucrat, and I couldn't say I trusted her.

I was going to face the bully head-on. Hopefully, Ezhya Palayi hadn't left Barresh yet. I typed, *I need to see you immediately about a matter of great importance*. With commanding pronouns. I signed off with my name and selected *send* before I changed my mind. There. I was going to play him at his own games.

Now—what was I to do about Danziger's command to come back?

According to my contract of employment, Nations of Earth could recall me for a specified period of time, and *gamra* would need to be notified.

Had Danziger done that?

Come to Rotterdam to do what? To be carpeted for disappearing under the noses of Nations of Earth Special Services Branch spies? To face suspicion about this plan, which I had to have known about, otherwise why had I left so quickly? To join Nicha in custody? Defying Danziger's order would probably amount to resignation. I was pretty much on my own already, but if I did that, I'd lose all the leverage I had.

No, I would have to do something else; but until I had a

brilliant idea, I'd have to stall.

I sent off a quick message to the office downstairs to ask if the money for travel had come in from Nations of Earth. It had.

I fired back another message, *Set it aside and do not touch it.*

Then I sent a message to Danziger, *According to my contract, gamra authorities will need to be notified if I am to be recalled. I would like to know if this has been done.*

Send.

Let Danziger take a few days to answer that, then I'd ask another question. Decide what to do when I had the answer. Could I possibly enlist some *gamra* support to keep me here?

"Are you coming? The staff are impatient to start serving."

Thayu's voice jolted me out of my concentration.

I stared at her, vaguely remembering lunch. "I'll be there soon." Damn, I didn't have the time for lunch.

"The food is really good."

"Yes, yes, I'm coming." Dazed, I pressed myself off the seat. I hesitated, then quickly copied the plan onto my reader and carried that into the sitting room. I slotted the original into my code-protected work area.

Thayu hadn't lied. A gauze-like golden cloth covered the table, and on it stood a selection of bowls and plates so colourful I could barely believe all this was edible. There were slices of fruit—orange, yellow, red and vivid purple, salads in green, white and red, jars of juices, smoked fish—or so I thought—pickled mushrooms, nuts, various kinds of bread and of course the ever-present red tea.

Eirani waited at the head of the table, giving me a sharp look when I put my reader next to me and sat down.

"The staff promised to show the Delegate proper food. This is the local food of Barresh, Delegate. All the freshest, best quality the markets offer. This bread is made from the nuts of the megon tree."

She put a thick slice of bread on my plate, grey in colour with a swirl of brown. It smelled of roasted almonds. My stomach

rumbled.

“What code is it?”

“The Delegate can eat everything on the table. Barresh has a gentle climate and we are not so desperate that we need to eat food with nasty poisons.” A glare at Thayu.

Thayu returned the glare. “And if some of us didn’t have such delicate stomachs, there would be no nasty poisons.”

Enough. I placed my hands on the table, as if I was about to get up. “If you two are going to be like this to each other, that’s fine, but at least tell me what it’s about, do it somewhere else, or shut up and stop sniping at each other!”

Oh, Delegate, much too direct.

Eirani stared out the window, her face impassive.

Thayu looked down at her empty bowl, lips twitching.

So they were going to be stubborn. Fine! Just fine, for crying out loud. As if I didn’t have enough trouble already.

We ate in total silence. I tore pieces off the bread, and picked at some salad. I made an effort to try at least a bit of every dish. Eirani supplied me with more fish, an orange meat with a strong salt-and-pepper taste.

But my thoughts were in the communication hub, that dark place devoid of daylight, where there might be messages from Danziger, and my stomach seemed to have taken leave of its normal appetite.

I took my reader and thumbed it into life, shifted my chair so I faced the window, and dragged my tea closer.

The reader’s screen had come up with the material Danziger had sent. I studied the maps, the detailed plans of apartment blocks, water storage, canteens, covered walkways, tube trains. Why had Danziger said nothing about this discovery when I spoke to him?

Even Sirkonen must have known. Then another thought: was there more on the datastick than weather maps? Oh, damn.

I fished it out of my pocket and inserted it in my reader. It

whirred and whirred, but nothing came up on the screen.

I took it out and put it back in. The same thing happened.

Damn, the laundry. While most data media were waterproof, who said they were resistant to soap?

“Anything wrong?” Thayu asked.

I shook my head, pulled the datastick out again, and put it back. It whirred, but nothing came up. Sweat broke out on my upper lip.

Thayu still stared at me. I was doubly glad I had removed the feeder. Someone had put her in this apartment with me for a purpose, I was sure of that. What if the purpose was to get her hands on this data and destroy it so as to destroy evidence of Asto’s guilt?

She looked at the reader. “It’s not working? Let me have it and I’ll see what I can do.”

No, I couldn’t have that. “No, it’s fine.”

Eyebrows rose. “It makes that noise when it refuses to read.”

“I’m not sure you could fix it. The data is not recorded according to the Asto system.”

She gave me a sharp, what-do-you-think-I-am look. “I don’t know that a different system should be a problem. Hedron uses different coding, too. The principles of each are similar. It’s a matter of reading binary code, then just applying formulas of how many *bits* there are to a *byte*.”

That shook me more than anything else. She didn’t know Isla, but she knew those words. What was she—a trained network spy? She was right about the data of course. Although different systems used different conventions, all digital technology was based on the same principles.

No, I decided. I couldn’t let her have it. Not at all. Not until I knew Asto’s intentions. Not until I knew that secret she’d almost let slip this morning in the assembly hall. “Thanks for offering, but I think I can manage.”

I was no ace at computer skills, but I did have a program on my

reader that might help me—at least I thought I had copied it after that course I had attended on data recovery. If I couldn't find it, or if it didn't work, I would ask assistance from a specialist at Nations of Earth. Failing that . . . I remembered how in Sirkonen's office, a man in Special Services uniform had taken a copy. There would be copies on Earth.

When I finished eating, I took the datastick and my reader back into the communication room. Alone.

For some reason, a conversation I'd had with Amarru came into my mind. We'd been sitting in her office sipping hot cups of *manazhu*. It had been winter, and the cityscape outside the window was bleak and grey.

She'd said, "Between you and me, Cory, I'm convinced that one of the reasons Seymour Kershaw committed suicide was that he had become isolated. He found it hard to trust people, even those we had sent to work with him."

Amarru, of course, had gone through the whole crisis; she was a lot older than me.

I had been so convinced that isolation and lack of trust would never be my problems. I had a *zhayma*. I would run an open system, encourage people to inquire, and I'd give open answers to all of them. But in hindsight, that was just a load of bullshit.

In the real world, people spied and cheated and went behind your back.

In the real world, you couldn't trust everyone, maybe not even anyone.

I sank into the chair and activated the Exchange connection. While the icon crawled over the projection, I rummaged on the seat, found Thayu's translator, and pressed both on and off buttons for a few seconds to completely flatten the charge. Even if the office downstairs held a supply of charged pearls, she'd have to go there first, and I would have time to get material out of her reach.

Damn, I was starting to think like a detective now.

I shoved the datastick in my reader.

Luckily, I found the program in one of my tucked-away folders which I didn't use often. I followed the instructions, but no matter what settings I used, the program wouldn't read the undamaged part of the file. My heart thudded in my throat. Did that mean that all of it was damaged?

The connection icon for the Exchange was still crawling at the bottom of the projection. Wonderful. Out of all times, the link chose this moment to play up.

I brought up the *gamra* link—it worked fine—and entered my code.

A number of messages came up. A news report on my first appearance in *zhamata*, generally favourable. A report from *Shey' shamata*, the major news service of Asto, on Nicha's capture, forwarded on by staff in the office downstairs. I guessed the *local lawkeeper* Inu Azimi who was mentioned was the same person as Nixie Chan. That made sense. Azimi clan were administrators. The report said, *Meanwhile, Inu has assured Nicha's family in Beratha that help will be asked for when the local officials keep stalling his release.*

There was also a message from Nicha's father, *I am getting impatient about my son. Please advise on your progress in negotiations.*

I cringed, seeing Asto military craft descend on Rotterdam. I had no progress to report. Nicha was a hostage, along with two hundred thousand other Coldi. After having seen Danziger's material, I doubted if there was going to be a peaceful solution.

That link to Earth still wouldn't work.

Oh goddamn it! *This isn't helpful, people, not helpful at all.*

I fiddled with the reader and discovered another option on the recovery program that was called *map file*. When I selected it, a solid block of numbers and letters came onto the screen.

Hexadecimal code, I guessed, because the numbers went up to nine and the letters up to F. I turned on the projector so I could see a greater section of the data and scrolled up, and then down,

feeling stupid.

Whatever had given me the notion that I would be able to fix this file? I was a diplomat, and knew nothing about the inner workings of computers. Nicha had usually taken care of that. Coldi were good with numbers, and binary and hexadecimal numbers ran in their blood, since they counted everything in exponentials of two. The exceedingly complicated counting system reflected the Coldi sense of outward-spreading spider veins of a network. In Coldi, *one, two, three, four, five* really meant two, four, eight, sixteen, thirty-two, representing an ever-increasing circle of influence. In Coldi societies, you could not subtract five from sixteen and arrive at a workable number. Mathematicians had devised notations for anomalies like the number eleven. There was spoken mathematics and absolute mathematics. Coldi children learned both from birth.

And here I am, not trusting the only person in this apartment who can help me.

I scrolled further down.

There were gaps in the data, all over the file.

“That’s artificial,” a voice said near the door.

I gasped and whirled around.

Thayu leaned against the doorframe, her arms crossed over her chest. How long had she been standing there?

“Artificial?”

“Yes, don’t you see it?” Professional-you. She strode forward, scrolled back up. “Look at the data pattern here.” She pointed at the image. “And down here.” She pointed again.

I didn’t see anything except numbers, numbers and more numbers, and random gaps. “See this pattern? It repeats all over, at regular intervals. This is from the damaged file, isn’t it?”

“It is.”

“This damage was deliberately caused. Whatever was on this, someone didn’t want you to read this information, or wanted to destroy proof. Is it important?”

"I don't know." What a lame answer. How about: *a president has been murdered over this*? But why? Did she know?

Maybe, I decided; but before I questioned her, there was one other person in this household who might know more.

I pushed myself up from my seat. "I think it's time I have a bath."

A bit after midday, of course, was not the appropriate time for a bath, but Eirani came with me nevertheless, bringing her basket of towels and soaps. She didn't question the strange timing, and that in itself might be a sign.

I undressed, sank into the water and sat back on the underwater bench. Eirani unloaded the contents of the basket onto a bench, and spread out towels and clean clothing, in a way more meticulous than previously. She cast me glances when she thought I wasn't looking.

Finally, she asked, "Does the Delegate wish to retire early today? The Delegate was up most of last night."

"No, Eirani. I want to ask you something, in private."

She froze, a towel in her hand. "Does the Delegate need to go into the bath for that?"

"I do." There was only one bug in the bathroom, in the far corner, and with a bit of luck, our voices would echo too much to be intelligible.

"Eirani, where did you take my jacket to be washed?"

"To the laundry. It has come back, hasn't it? I—"

"When you took it, did you know about the thing in the pocket?" I made sure I splashed water over my shoulders as I said this.

"Delegate?" Her cheeks coloured. "I don't check clothing for private items."

"But you knew it was there when you took it out of the bathroom, didn't you? And you knew that someone at the laundry

would be interested in it.”

She opened and closed her mouth several times, like a fish on dry land. “I . . . don’t know what the Delegate is talking about.”

Oh, the innocence.

“Eirani, as I have told you, I am perfectly capable of washing myself. You may find it unusual, but I have lived independently, and I can cook and wash my own clothes. You know that my funds are tight. It is my bet everyone on the island knows this. But in the time I’ve been here, no one has presented me with an account for staying in this apartment, which is obviously beyond my capacity to pay. To me, that means someone *wants* me here, like someone who is spying on me.” I let that sink in for a bit; she showed no emotion, and then I asked, “Who is your boss, Eirani, and what does he want?”

“My . . .” Her mouth fell open. “I don’t have—”

“Yes, you do.”

I let the silence build and slipped under the water. I rubbed my face, and came back up, my heart thudding. It had been stupid perhaps, to come here alone. But when the water cleared from my eyes, she was still staring at me, and hadn’t produced a weapon.

I pulled myself onto the underwater bench, out of her reach, and sat, semi-lazily, trying to look as relaxed as possible. My heart was thudding like crazy.

“Eirani, I understand that you have ties of loyalty that conflict with mine. I understand that my living here is a favour of me to you, rather than the other way around. I agree to it. The apartment is pleasant and the food is good.”

She merely blinked at me.

“But in the future, Mr Renkati can ask for information I have, and if I’m free to do so, I might share it. You understand that?”

“Yes, Delegate.”

“Also, you can pass onto Mr Renkati that if he wants, he can come and meet me, and tell me what he’s about. Destroying the data isn’t helping anyone. The information will be recovered, one

way or another. There are other copies. Tell him that, too.”

“Yes, Delegate.” She looked down, all her taciturn arrogance wiped from her face.

I stirred in the water. “If you’re still keen, I’d like you to wash my hair, Eirani.”

She sank onto her knees and put soap in my hair. Her hands trembled.

Mr Renkati: one, Cory Wilson: one.

When I came out of the bathroom, my hair still wet, but neatly tied in a ponytail, I nearly crashed into Thayu, who came rushing from the hall.

“There was a message from Ezhya Palayi. He says he will be delighted to see you right now.”

DELIGHTED TO SEE me; that was a bit steep. Knowing the situation, I had no idea why Ezhya Palayi should be *delighted* to see me. The game continued, but I was ready to play it.

I'd ask my questions, clear and direct. *What does Asto know of this plan, and do you realise Nations of Earth see it as a provocation? and Does this matter bear any relationship to the murder of the president?*

In like a kamikaze pilot. Accuse the most powerful leader, out of all *gamra* member entities, of murder. I had to be the biggest idiot in the universe.

Thayu led me over the gallery and down the steps. It was just at the midafternoon break and people crowded the steps and the plaza below. In the throng of delegates in the staircase, many threw me curious glances, or spoke congratulatory words about my first appearance, which I acknowledged with a polite nod while trying to focus on what I would say in the meeting.

Part of me found it hard not to feel awed. Ezhya Palayi had been in my life for a long time. I remembered when I was five or six, and my mother was still alive, when the entire world watched news reports showing the arrival in Athens of Asto's Chief Coordinator on his first ever official visit.

At the time, Earth was just emerging from the anarchy of what historians now called the Third World War, but which was a series of conflicts over hot spots in the Middle East and Central Asia, and which had dragged on for the best part of fifty years. The fighting

had been more contained than expected, but had done major damage to what remained of Earth's already-depleted oil fields. Beyond that, the damage was psychological. Poor countries, feeling the double-whammy of changing climate and financial pressure, had affected boycotts. Deep distrust had paralysed the UN and as a result, richer nations, the US in the lead, had refused to pay their contributions, reducing it to an organisation which represented the poorest. As revenge, continued boycotts had destroyed a number of major economies and their governments. The US, China and India had split along equity lines. That came on top of climatic disasters. By the end of the century, large parts of the world suffered hunger and lack of water.

Even in unaffected countries, like where I grew up in New Zealand, people were hurting, clamouring for hope. Many had lost family members, in the wars or in countries which had descended into chaos. Others had lost their houses, or all their life's savings. A diversion, any diversion, was welcome.

Gamra planned their coming out well.

The people had liked what they saw of Ezhya Palayi: his sleek shimmering aircraft—it had been one of the few times that a *gamra* based aircraft had openly landed at a regular airport—and how he bounded down the gangplank and met the brand-new Nations of Earth president, then the moustachioed Pedro Gonzales. Ezhya Palayi was young, handsome, and his smile oh-so charismatic. A fake smile, I later realised, because the Coldi smile was a much more intimate expression than it was on Earth, and Coldi didn't smile at strangers. But his minders had taught him well about Earth manners, including smiling, and the people had lapped it up.

This would be the man, with his technology, to lift them from their misery. People loved to dream, after all.

And what a dream it had been. The Coldi had fallen from saviours to invaders in the space of twenty years, despite, or maybe because of, the investments, the businesses, the technology they had brought, things that had been going on since the crash

landing of a ship carrying two political refugees from Asto on a remote beach on the Greek island of Kea in 1961.

I eyed Thayu's swishing ponytail. An invasion? She wouldn't want to live on Earth—not warm enough. Earth had its fair share of problems, overcrowding being one of the more serious ones. Asto was overcrowded, too. There were many other worlds which were fertile and underpopulated. The Coldi hadn't invaded Ceren, their neighbouring planet, either, so why would they invade Earth? Surely if they wanted to do that, they would have already done so.

From the crowded stairs we went into the plaza, where the multi-hued spots of light falling through the ceiling window turned the groups of chatting delegates into a playful kaleidoscope of colours. We crossed the ground floor and went up the stairs to an apartment opposite mine. A bevy of guards waited outside the door, a solid wall of Coldi muscle, clad in body armour over silver temperature-retaining suits. All wore the red belts of Asto's Inner Circle service. They carried charge guns, and arms and legs bulged with various attachments and pockets, hooks and electronic equipment. Out of the four, two were women, both with muscles that would put a body builder to shame. I had admired Thayu's athletic build, but she looked emaciated compared to these guards.

They parted to let our group through, none of them meeting our eyes, as per Coldi protocol. A guard opened the door.

I walked inside, into a wall of dry heat that seared my skin, like midday in Arcadia, somewhere in the high forties, perhaps even hotter. I had to stop, concentrating on breathing, my eyes watering, thinking that I would never be able to stay for more than five minutes. Could I go back to take two extra infusor doses without losing face?

Gradually, my body became used to the dry heat, although sweat poured off me, seeping into my shirt in ugly dark stains.

Thayu glanced at me, a look of concern on her face.

I gave a small nod, as if to say *I'm fine*. I *had* lived in Arcadia after all. Without climatic adaptation.

We were in a hall such as the one in my apartment. Bright light radiated from what looked like glow-in-the-dark towel rods mounted vertically along the walls.

A fluffy maroon carpet covered the middle of the floor, the area in which there was a five-pointed star in the hall of my apartment. I also noticed that this floor was plain white stone. Coldi valued simplicity.

Opposite the door stood a table with, on one side, a glittering gemstone on a thin but very tall stand of silvery metal, looking like some absurd insect's feeler. On the other side of the table a number of rough rocks lay in a glass dish.

A typically Coldi arrangement, symbolising *rimoyu*, balance, a state of perfection in the Coldi mind. That was why they always did everything in pairs.

Having heard a bit about the Coldi penchant for precious stones, I could only imagine that the stone on the stand was worth a fortune. Elevated over the unworked rocks, it probably meant to say that refinement wins over crudeness. I had learned from Nicha that it was important to pay attention to these types of items when coming to a Coldi house, because they were rarely purely decorative, but said something about the mood of the host and the subject he or she wanted to cover.

So—was I right in interpreting that Ezhya Palayi wanted me to ease on demands and anger? I glanced at Thayu, who looked quite relaxed. I had no idea if I should have put my feeder back. Thayu hadn't said anything about it, and I surmised that whatever communication we had through it wouldn't be private anyway. Rumours went that Ezhya Palayi had no less than three feeders and that his immediate advising staff needed special training to keep up with him. Probably I was safer without.

Guards led me into the sitting room, also paved with the same smooth white stone, and devoid of the bathing pool so popular with the locals.

Coldi hated water.

Here, too, there were carpets, and low tables made from heavy beams of material that looked like granite. Cushions on the floor and the heavy curtains that half-obscured the windows were all maroon, which I knew to be a much-favoured colour, and I wondered what this signified, because Coldi didn't see the colour red, yet Nicha could tell the difference between this rich maroon and black.

Ezhya Palayi sat on a couch near the window, legs crossed, Buddha-like, his hands resting in his lap.

From close up, his age showed more than it had in the assembly hall. Strands of white highlighted his hair, giving it the impression of a partly albino peacock, a salt-and-pepper look that softened the normally harsh lines of the Coldi face.

I didn't meet his eyes. In his home, that would not be appropriate. I performed a greeting such as Coldi gave a superior, a small bow with the hands by my sides. I hated every bit of this subservience, but I wasn't about to start off the meeting by offending him. There would be plenty of offending later.

"Sit." The voice was decisive without being overly harsh.

I sat.

Only then did I notice the second person in the room, on a couch to his left. Someone tall, with long white hair, wearing a long blue- and gold-rimmed robe. I shot up and bowed for the second time. "My excuses. I didn't realise the Delegate was here."

"I did not advertise it." Faint amusement coloured Chief Delegate Akhtari's voice; she used professional, not formal, pronouns. "I believe, though, that what you have to say is important enough for me to hear."

I resettled on the couch feeling more uneasy. I guessed she knew the content of Danziger's message, and I wondered who she was going to side with to make the other man squirm.

These two people facing me held all of *gamra*, all its member and even non-member entities, in their grip. I had no doubt that both of them regarded me as a chess piece to be moved to their

advantage. “I am afraid you are right about the urgency of this matter, Delegate. We need to move so that it doesn’t get out of hand.”

“Indeed, talks are very much called for. A person can only hope that all parties will be restrained in their reactions.” A slight barb to Danziger. She said nothing about the fact that Nations of Earth wanted to recall me, so I guessed no one had officially notified her.

From the seat to my right, Ezhya Palayi gave a snort. “So what’s all this about?”

Typical Coldi.

I bowed to Delegate Akhtari. “My excuses, Delegate.”

“The Delegate has no reason to give excuses. It is other parties that are not observing protocol.” And that was a definite barb in Ezhya Palayi’s direction. What had the two of them been discussing before I came?

Even with my eyes downcast, I noticed Ezhya Palayi glaring at her. “There is no protocol to be observed. Just tell us what it’s about.”

I couldn’t help but agree with him.

In total silence, I put my reader on the table, unfolding the projection stand. By now I was so hot that a sheen of sweat coated my hands and made slippery marks on everything I touched. It was hard to concentrate. “My *president* sent me the information I’m about to show, and it greatly disturbs me, as it has disturbed him.” I activated the projector.

A copy of the plan hung in the air, with drawn outlines of buildings, streets, landing pads, even a separate Exchange node.

“As far as we can determine, this is a project planned by Asto to be located on Earth, and as far as my *president* has been able to ascertain, without the approval of the local governments or Nations of Earth. The proposed locality of this project would be here.” I zoomed out to show a map of northern Africa. It also showed the Mediterranean and the southern part of Greece, with the location of the Exchange clearly marked.

Since I wasn't allowed to look Ezhya Palayi in the face, I could only guess what the man thought by glancing out of the corner of my eye. And that didn't give me much of a clue. No frown, no hand raised to his mouth, no laughter. There was a silence which seemed to go on for a long time.

Then he asked, "Where did your *president* get this material?" Again, there was little emotion in the voice.

"He says it came from the office of the previous *president*." I wiped sweat from my forehead. Sweat stung the skin on my cheeks after its abuse with the blunt razor.

"The one who was killed?"

"Yes."

Another short silence. I imagined getting comments about Asto's involvement, denials, accusations even against Nations of Earth, but the silence lingered. I remembered the table arrangement in the hall and the relevant proverb came to me. A *gem on a ring has more clout than a gem in the ground*. Refinement gets you further than brute force.

Faced with my rude, in *gamra's* eyes, provocation, he seemed to take his own advice to heart.

Then a yellow-skinned hand moved into my field of vision. "May I?"

"At your service."

I pushed the reader over the table.

Ezhya Palayi zoomed in again until the plan reappeared, then scrolled through all corners of it. Then he pointed to a handwritten scrawl at the bottom of one of the architectural drawings.

"This is signed by Mizha."

I scrambled through my knowledge of Asto's Inner Circle for the name Mizha, but drew a blank. By the way Thayu raised her eyebrows, she didn't seem to know either. That was odd, because Coldi always knew *everything* about their world.

Delegate Akhtari leaned further forward, her hair falling over her shoulders. "Mizha? What would it be doing in the killed

president's possession?"

"The question asks itself." He turned to me.

"The current *president* didn't tell me." Sirkonen seemed to have had a lot of things he shouldn't have had. "At this moment, he is of the belief that Asto is about to invade Earth to put this plan into action. I feel it my task to assess if it's genuine, or some sort of hoax."

Ezhya Palayi gave a chuckle. "Oh, it's genuine all right."

"You mean . . ." My heart hammered in my throat.

Across the room Delegate Akhtari looked on, long fingers worrying at her upper lip.

Ezhya Palayi continued, "I mean that this plan, these maps are genuine. This plan was approved by an Asto Chief Coordinator. Mizha was a predecessor."

Thayu spoke up, "But with respect, I thought your predecessor's name was—"

"Shaya, yes. Mizha took over in 3278."

In Earth years, that was in . . . 1975.

Oh.

I frowned at Thayu. Why would Danziger be worried about a plan more than a hundred years old?

Staring at the projection, Thayu said softly, "There is no date on this."

I had noticed that, too.

"No," Ezhya Palayi said. "The date would instantly give this away as a hoax. I don't know who obtained these plans and what their aim is releasing them now, but someone is trying to destabilise Asto's relationship with Nations of Earth and *gamra* by doing so."

"Someone?" I was too numb to feel angry, so much of a shock it was to me.

"I would very much like to know how your *president* obtained this data."

"It's the *president's* jurisdiction, so he has every right to have

knowledge of this. I am afraid that this revelation will be a great danger to the relationship, especially in the light of what has happened. Already, people are saying that Asto killed the *president* because he was about to make this plan public. If it's not genuine then Nations of Earth is going to want some very strong apologies, before relationships can deteriorate further." All right, I was angry now.

Delegate Akhtari snorted. "If I may be so impolite, Ezhya, but I fully support the Delegate's outrage. This . . ." She gestured at the screen. ". . . is a gross violation of *gamra* law."

"Which is probably why Mizha didn't judge it worth the risk." I wondered how the man stayed completely calm.

My heart still beating furiously, I said, "Just to be clear: the plan is dead."

"Yes. It was never approved by the First Circle administrators."

Never revived either? Asto always had overcrowding issues. They didn't produce enough food for their own population. This was a sophisticated design, with a lot of detail. Did I believe him?

I glanced at Delegate Akhtari. Did *she* believe him? I thought not.

There was a brief moment of silence, in which Thayu fiddled with some of her equipment. She glanced at the screen of her comm unit. Her eyes widened, but then she tucked the unit away.

"That still leaves the question: what is this material doing in the *president's* hands?" Ezhya Palayi was looking uncomfortably at me while he said this and I was resisting the urge to return his gaze and tell him he'd better answer that himself. No, I didn't believe him either. I knew that much of Asto's government structure. First Circle administrators didn't have the authority to make decisions as big as this. They only had the power to make decisions when delegated by the Inner Circle and, most likely, vetted by the power at the very top. I hadn't missed the bank of readers with the Asto command key in the corner of the room. This man looked in on every decision made in his name. This man was not a good-natured

leader. By Earth definitions, he was an absolute dictator.

Ravaged by hunger and poverty, Saharan countries might well have sold large areas of land to Asto. There might well be an underground population of Coldi operating in Africa. The Coldi might well own the land, never mind that they hadn't yet built anything on it.

Then, to my surprise, Ezhya Palayi said, "Joyelin, I would appreciate if I could have a private word with the Delegate."

Delegate Akhtari raised one thin eyebrow, but rose and left the room, taking two black-clad guards with her.

As soon as she had left, Ezhya Palayi snapped his fingers at the guard at the door, who went to the other side of the room, opened a cupboard, and reached inside. Rows of lights winked off. Turning off the recording equipment. Thayu watched with hungry eyes.

Ezhya Palayi of course owned this apartment and could turn off the listening equipment whenever he pleased. If I turned off any of my listening devices, I bet I would have someone bashing down my door within half an hour, if not sooner.

Even the guards left.

Thayu did not. I met her eyes briefly; they blazed with anger. I mouthed *what?* Anger and irritation simmered just under the surface. My shirt clung to me with sweat, and my head swam with dizziness. The heat was worse than midday in the sun at Taurus, but I would not give in.

A yellow-skinned hand reached out, hot even in this searing temperature, and touched my chin, pushing it up until my eyes met Ezhya's. The irises glimmered with golden spots. I tried not to feel belittled by this gesture. To be allowed to face him was a victory in Coldi eyes, but, damn it, I was too hot to think rationally, and I was *not* a toddler and found it *very* hard not to feel treated as one at this moment.

A minute passed during which we just looked into each other's eyes. My heart thudded like crazy. This was the moment of danger. Was he going to react to me? If he did, I only had Thayu to protect

me, and I wasn't sure that she wouldn't support him over me.

He blinked. Stiffened. Blinked again.

And settled back on the couch.

I let out a breath. Whatever his instinct had decided about me, I was not deemed to be a direct threat.

He said, "I am strongly aware that Asto is being blamed for the death of the *president*, especially in light of this information you have just shown me."

I fought to concentrate. "It is true. My president demands an explanation."

"So do we. Tell me this: if *we* wanted to kill the president, would we have left the building standing?"

Was that a threat or an admission?

"Oh, do not think that we haven't considered sending the military. The military is still on standby. We sent your *president* a writ. It would be good to know whether he intends to reply."

"A writ? For what purpose?" This was going in an entirely unexpected direction. Surely accusing Asto wasn't an offence that justified a legal action as severe as a writ? They mostly covered property matters, and crime. If anything, if there was enough evidence, Asto would have expected a writ *from* Nations of Earth asking for explanation. A writ which would have included evidence for Nations of Earth's position.

This was . . . unexpected.

He continued, his voice more measured. "I commissioned some work to be done by a leading scientist. We paid for her time, her expertise. Secrecy was important, because we did not want to raise panic within our own population. She promised us this secrecy, for a handsome payment, and as far as we can ascertain, she did the work. The next thing we knew, your *president* was talking about the results. We then contacted the scientist, who said that she had been pressured into giving the information to the *president*, and that she had no choice or harm would come to her."

Shit. Elsi Schumacher. This was getting more complicated by

the day. “What sort of work? I’m guessing it was a climate assessment?”

“It was indeed.”

“For what purpose?”

“There have been some disturbing changes in our climate recently. The people of Asto are nervous and want to understand what is happening. Nothing of this scale has happened before, and on your world it has. I wanted predictions and models so that we can allay people’s fears and plan for the future. It seems that some are already panicking.”

“Like planning settlements on Earth.”

“That is a totally false allegation.” His voice was now downright angry. “The plans pre-date this information by many years, which is probably why the person who wanted your *president* to draw that conclusion removed the date.”

I didn’t allow myself to be intimidated, even though I was now so hot I thought I’d faint. I wasn’t sure whether to believe him; I couldn’t think properly. “Do you realise that the scientist who did the work has also been killed?”

“I do. It seems that she has disappeared with her work, and that even a writ to return the material for which we have paid—which expired yesterday and is awaiting my instructions—has not produced results.”

I realised the value of what I had in my apartment: Sirkonen’s datastick, that I needed to fix. “My *president* does not understand the nature of Asto writs.”

“He should. It was explained.”

For all the great impression that would make. I could imagine the uproar in the corridors of Nations of Earth. *And they bully us into giving this to them?* Unfortunately, posturing was part of Asto’s tactics. Pomp and ceremony, and frightening shows of numbers. They were like peacocks, but Nations of Earth might well misinterpret their bluff for real aggression, and therein was real danger of the type that involved military aircraft and weapons.

I said, "This material is of that much importance to Asto? To risk armed conflict?"

His eyes met mine squarely. "Listen to me, Delegate. Conflict will follow for those who choose to mess with us."

Ezhya Palayi rose from the couch, indicating that the interview was over. "The material is ours, and we paid for it. The scientist had no business giving it to someone else, least of all to the *president*. That it might have been a factor in his death is unfortunate, but has nothing to do with us. I want you to go back there, Delegate, and let your *president* know that I want the material or there will be consequences."

I rose, too, and bowed. "With all respect, even if I go, I can't guarantee that I'll be able to retrieve anything. It is part of an investigation of justice." A process Asto wouldn't understand.

He stiffened. "Get me that material and we'll talk. I'll be happy to provide you with protection."

"Armed personnel, you mean, *your* guards." With all the wrong pronouns. Oh, I was overstepping my boundaries; I knew that, somewhere in between being terminally hot and damned annoyed with his posturing. For all I knew, he had been intending to build this settlement in the Sahara.

He stepped so close I could feel his heat. He was about my height, tall for Coldi, and his eyes were extraordinarily gold-flecked. There was another moment of intense silence, of sizing me up. Too late perhaps, I realised that he had never fully relaxed after that initial eye contact.

From the corner of my eye, I spotted silver-and-maroon figures entering the room: his guards were back.

"You, Delegate, are impertinent." And that was a very rare form of *you* that only Coldi of high rank could use.

If he thought it intimidated me, however, he was wrong. I no longer cared. "If you want to deal with my entity in peace, you better get used to that."

I didn't realise how much I trembled until I stood on the gallery outside, where even the sultry Barresh breeze felt like a blizzard on my skin.

I raked a hand through my hair. A large strand came undone from my ponytail. It was damp with sweat.

I swore, loudly.

"He does that on purpose, to intimidate people," Thayu said, after a while. Her voice was soft.

"Well I'm not going to be intimidated. I swear I'll get to the bottom of this, I'll—"

"We, not you." Inclusive, intimate we.

I stared at her.

"Don't forget what you said a few days ago: we are in the same shit together. How about you let me in on what's going on?" The anger shimmered through the restraint in her voice.

I grabbed the balcony railing with sweaty hands. *Please, I have no time for this now.* Down on the ground floor of the building, a woman in a red robe led a group of girls across the hall. "They have school visits here?"

"You're changing the subject. You've been changing the subject on me all day." Accusing-you.

"No, I haven't—"

"You haven't? Then what about that damaged datastick you have? You try to fix it? You couldn't even find the right flap to load recharges for your reader. You don't want me to see it, that's all there is to it."

I opened my mouth, but she kept going, "No, don't try to deny it. You remember what my position is? I'm your *zhayma*. I'm supposed to help you, but all you do is cut me out, block your feeder access, and now you're not even wearing it anymore. Do you think I can work with that?" All accusatory pronouns.

"Thayu, please—"

“No. I think it’s time we had a good talk. Come.” She took my arm in a vicelike grip. Then she gestured to Evi and Telaris, who had waited at a distance. “*Mashara*.”

I stumbled along with her, too sick to care where she took me, too sick to fight.

After a blur of corridors, courtyards and stairwells, we arrived in a part of the complex where I had never been. Here, the thoroughfares narrowed and the walls on both sides blocked out light, especially because plants spilled over every inch of gallery railing on all four floors above us, filtering light to a muted green. The air was heavy with humidity.

Thayu led me into an elaborate arched entrance which gave access to a cool hall, where our footsteps echoed against a ceiling I couldn’t see in the sudden gloom. Light streamed in through an open door on the other side. I caught glimpses of lush greenery.

Thayu fished in one of her many pockets, produced her account card and went up to a counter in the hall with the words, “Just for two.”

The woman behind the counter took her card.

By now, I felt dizzy.

Evi and Telaris stationed themselves in the shady archway. A man in a green shirt led us into a courtyard in which grew a veritable rainforest. Flowering bushes and mossy trunks. Steaming water in lush dark pools. People sat in the water, sipping drinks. In a basin in the corner a young man rinsed a middle-aged woman’s hair. The lower half of her body hidden in water, her ample breasts just tickled the surface. The attendant gestured at a pool surrounded by flowering bushes too low to completely hide the occupants from the rest of the courtyard.

“Thank you,” Thayu said, and to me, “Come.”

I stopped dead. “Oh no. Oh no, I’m not going in there.”

“Yes, you are. You suffer from heat stroke, and you have some sort of problem. I am your *zhayma*, and although you seem to have forgotten that I am here to help you, I will, whether you want it or

not. So you are going to take off your clothes, get in the water and then you're going to tell me what's going on."

"No, *you* tell me what's going on. You work for Asto. You have some sort of loyalty to Ezhya Palayi. Just in case you hadn't noticed back there, he's knee-deep in this little tangle." All my pronouns were of the accusatory form. I was reeling, not thinking clearly. I had *never* used accusatory pronouns when talking to Nicha.

"Yes, I've noticed. I'm also guessing that he's probably after that datastick you didn't want to give me."

"Too right I didn't. You're a spy, aren't you?"

She planted her hands at her sides, glaring at me.

"Trained by the Intelligence division of the First Circle Elite, if you have to know."

Holy fucking shit. The best spying organisation on Asto, maybe the best there was in the known universe. "Then why didn't you just tell your big boss about the datastick back in that room?"

"Because my contract is with *gamra*. Because Delegate Akhtari appointed me to work with *you*, and that's what I'll do, no matter how stupidly you behave!"

"I don't behave stupidly!"

The people in the next pool had stopped talking and turned to us.

She lowered her voice and grabbed my arm. "You don't? Then why do you distrust me so? Because I belong to the side you love to accuse of invasion? You know nothing about us. You have no idea how to behave. You know nothing about *imayu*."

Her eyes blazed. She was so much like, no she *was*, Inaru. Fire and passion. Burning anger.

"I don't accuse Asto of invasion. And I know about shared loyalties, and *imayu*." Yet, I had ignored this aspect. She *had* sworn loyalty to *gamra* and those types of loyalties were not easily violated. Those bonds were almost pathological and part of the Coldi biological make-up. I *should* trust her not to do anything that

would harm me, even if she *did* report to this man I didn't trust as far as I could throw him. Because that was how Coldi society worked. Tangled webs. Everyone was connected to everyone else.

"What then? All you've done is keep me away. *Just listen and translate, I'll fix it myself, I want to bathe by myself*, that's all you do. By yourself. And get into the water. People are staring at us."

"Fine!"

What the fuck did I know anyway? I was failing, coming apart at the seams, pretending to know what I was doing, but I knew nothing. In critical moments, I understood nothing of these people's behaviour. Any of my attempts to pretend otherwise were a farce.

I turned to face the bushes and tried to peel off my sweaty shirt, but my hands trembled so much I couldn't negotiate the fiddly hooks of the fastening.

She mumbled, "I don't know how Nicha put up with this."

"Keep Nicha out of it."

"I'll talk about whatever I want. Did you treat Nicha like this, too?"

"No, if you really have to know. Nicha is . . ." *a man*.

I let my shoulders sag, because that was ultimately where the problem lay.

"Nicha is what? Is he better than me?"

"Stop twisting everything. Just shut up!"

I flung my shirt down. It flew past a branch with obscene pink dangling flowers. I felt like ripping the bushes out of the ground, like flinging dirt all over this lovely courtyard. Damn Ezhya Palayi and his brand of intimidation. Damn Thayu. Damn everything.

The next thing a warm hand touched my shoulder. Her breath tickled my skin.

"Hey, calm down, you." That was a very intimate you.

I repressed the insane urge to turn around and fling myself into her arms. Nicha would have touched me; Nicha would have offered comfort. Nicha *could* offer comfort.

Her hand moved over my shoulder, massaging muscles that ached with tenseness.

“Come into the water, seriously. Let’s stop this silly fight. You’re not well.”

I stepped away, out of her warm reach, and slipped into the water, trying not to look at her. But while I was trying so hard, of course I saw everything. Her soft, completely hair-less body, her round breasts with black nipples. Muscles moved under the skin of her shoulders while she settled on the bench. I took deep breaths to dispel the roaring of blood in my ears.

Face the problem head-on.

“Thayu, this is the first problem you must understand. In my world, if you’re contracted to a woman, it’s not right to be convenient to another.”

“Touching is convenient?”

“It is. So is sharing one’s thoughts.” Of course, they weren’t *just thoughts*, not for me. Neither was Thayu *just another woman*. Neither could I tell her how I had doubted her professionally and shouldn’t have.

“Oh.” A moment’s silence. “I’m sorry. You must care a lot about her.”

I shrugged, not meeting her eyes. I had thought far too little about Eva lately.

The silence lingered. Water rippled as she splashed it on her face, and glistened in diamond drops on soft shoulders. A young girl brought drinks, condensation pearling on the outside of the glass. I sipped, breathed out tension. The juice made a wonderful cold spot in my belly.

Talk and laughter from the other patrons drifted through the courtyard.

“Sorry I upset you,” I said. “I was stupid, really.” Stupid human reaction. I was not doing very well.

She gave me the most gorgeous look I had ever seen. Bright eyes with golden spots in the irises, even white teeth—no canines,

full, dark-skinned lips. “Does that mean I’m no longer on your suspect list?”

I sighed. “No. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have made you feel that way.”

She sat back and sipped from her drink.

My face glowed; my ears glowed. I kept hearing Amarru’s voice. *If you can’t trust your zhayma, you distrust the entire basis of the system.* She had said that in the second week of my training.

But damn it, I had Thayu imposed on me.

Just as much as Nicha hadn’t been my personal choice either. He’d been there; *gamra* had matched our personalities and he had loyalties to them.

No difference between him and Thayu, because *gamra* would have matched her to me, too. We fitted together in this job; we were complementary; it had always been designed that way.

Shit. Another near-fatal mistake, Delegate Wilson.

She said, “All right. About your datastick . . . Maybe I can fix it, or maybe not. It’s hard to say. I need to scan the matrix for irregularities. Maybe a single cleanup will do it, but I suspect not. I suspect there are more sequences embedded in the document, and I will need to run it through a parser. Any data that has been overwritten will be hard to replace. We may lose part of the information.” She figured all that from a single look?

A grim expression crossed her face. “It might be quicker to find someone else who holds a copy of it.”

“That’s what Ezhya Palayi wants.” I closed my hands around my drink, balancing the bottom of the cup on the surface of the water, thinking how I’d had many such bathing sessions with Nicha and how relaxing they had been. I felt much better, and ashamed I’d behaved like such a prick.

“I’m reluctant to do what Ezhya Palayi wants. I think everyone, not just Asto, has a right to know what this is about. Asto has something to hide, or he would not have sent Delegate Akhtari out of the room.”

While I spoke, an idea formed in my mind. “You know that Danziger has given me notice to come back?”

“I guess you want to use that opportunity to get the data.”

Was there anything this woman didn’t guess correctly?

“Maybe. It’s an option.”

Her eyes formed into mirthful little slits. “That is . . . sneaky.”

“A person has to be resourceful at times.”

Thayu gasped and hauled herself out of the water. Stark naked, and with me not sure where to look, she rummaged in the pile of clothes and returned with her comm unit. “I forgot to tell you. I received a message about a job.”

She turned so I could see the screen.

I read. *Come to the city wharf tomorrow. We have a paid contract to discuss with you.*

I frowned. “Who is this from?”

“There’s only a number,” Thayu said. “I got the message when we were with Ezhya Palayi. I haven’t had the time to track it yet. I’ll do that right now.” Her fingers went over the control panel.

“Is this the contact through Marin Federza?”

“I can’t tell from this information.”

“Where is the city wharf?”

“On the main island.”

“Meet there? Why? Is the employment in the city?”

She stared at the screen.

“Thayu?”

Her eyes wide, she turned to me. “Don’t go—I think the number belongs to Renkati.”

Bingo. He’d taken my bait.

“Of course I’ll go. Don’t you see? Somehow, this man plays an important in this whole matter. He’s funded the *movie*, and he’s been far too interested in what I do. He probably knows I’ve spoken to Ezhya Palayi, and now he’s annoyed that he couldn’t listen to that conversation. This is my chance find out who he is and what he wants.”

“But it could be a trap.”

“Of course it is, but that’s why Delegate Akhtari gave me you and Evi and Telaris, isn’t it?”

WITH A WHINE of metal on metal, the train whizzed on its track, away from the artificial *gamra* island. I stared out the window, where wan light reflected off the bits of water between clumps of reeds and the occasional tree.

Fortunately, it had stopped raining, but low clouds scooted over the roofs of the main island of Barresh, hiding the rock cliffs of the escarpment that lay beyond. Monsoon had started. Water churned darkly under the train line. Another few days, and it would turn into a flood, flushing out paddies and destroying dams, dragging anything loose in its inexorable quest towards the ocean.

Including dead bodies. Was I about to follow Seymour Kershaw?

I shivered, even though Thayu's heat radiated next to me.

You're fine?

I nodded, clenching my hands to fight an urge to fiddle with the feeder, which once again sat in my hair. Whether or not reinstalling it was a good idea I didn't know, but Thayu's argument that we might need it when something went wrong was more powerful than my misgivings.

Of course we'll need it. Why do you keep fighting it?

I met her perfect eyes, completely black in the low light.

You wouldn't understand.

Hell, I wasn't even sure I understood it myself. I was trying to keep my life in neat compartments, one containing my job, one containing Eva and the diplomatic set, back on Earth, the people I

represented. To protect them, to protect Eva, because *she* would definitely not understand. *What do you mean, you have to invite all these people to our wedding?* That was another minefield of relationships. Eva's family might tolerate Nicha's presence, but Amarru's or Thayu's? Yes, they were colleagues, not friends. No, Coldi didn't make that distinction. *Gamra* formality regarded these types of invitations as polite, the right thing to do. I could of course claim that Earth customs didn't extend to inviting work colleagues to private functions, but Amarru would be offended. She'd never tell me in so many words, but she would. Coldi saw their life as a continuum of interlacing contacts that balanced each other. People on Earth preferred barriers.

You make everything so complicated, Thayu scoffed.

But she joked. Ever since we had come back from the baths, Thayu and I had worked as a team.

Evi and Telaris sat a few seats back, pretending to be travelling by themselves. The message from Renkati had not explicitly told me to come alone, but Thayu said that no one on the streets of Barresh had guards. I didn't want to stand out.

She had supplied me, herself and the two guards with a locating device that had a little light which flashed more frequently when the others were near. It also sent a signal back to the hub in the apartment in case any of us became lost. I wore the device under the sleeve of my shirt—a local khaki—provided by Eirani. She had been suspicious at my request for local garb. Delegates should be proud to wear *gamra* blue, she said, and why would I go to markets on a foul day like this? But her protest hadn't been vehement. Judging by the look on her face, she knew something was up. Being in Renkati's pay, she might even have arranged this meeting.

The game continued.

When the train slowed, the guards sprang to their feet and went to the far end of the carriage.

I rose, too, as the island came closer. Thunder growled in the

distance.

The train stopped and the doors opened.

I stepped onto the platform amongst a stream of fellow passengers, mostly domestic workers on shopping trips, carrying empty baskets and bags. They formed a steady stream to the far end of the platform, purposeful like worker bees.

I let them pass, making sure that Thayu and the guards were still with me.

A humid cloud of droplets drifted under the station's roof. It had started raining again. Not much, but a drizzle that looked miserable and made people squint.

Having been built recently, the train lines never crossed the islands directly, but skirted them. On one side of the station was the island, the ochre houses crowded together all crooked and squished like blocks of rubber. Oversized trees cluttered whatever narrow alleys snaked through the maze of walls.

A metal walkway bridged the short distance between the station and the shore; from the walkway, a staircase went down to another walkway which backtracked under the rails to the deserted jetty, where I was to meet the contact.

I went down these stairs, Thayu a step behind me. My footfalls on the metal steps echoed between the pylons encrusted with sea-growth, and the underside of the platform. Evi and Telaris lingered at the top of the steps, pretending to be talking, but their eyes took in everything, and I had no doubt they would have their guns out within a second, if necessary.

But for now, there was no one down there.

The rainy weather had reduced the landscape to shades of silver and grey. Cloth-covered boats lay on the far side of the jetty, tied up with sodden ropes; piles of fishing baskets tottered next to bollards.

"Are you sure this is the right place?" I asked.

Just then, there was movement on the jetty and a boy unfolded his legs, rising from under the oilcloth which sheltered him from

the rain.

“Delegate Cory Wilson?”

“Yes, that’s me.”

“Come.” The boy threw off the cloth and ran down the jetty, up the stairs.

“Hey, wait!” I yelled, but he kept going. His thin legs disappeared up the stairs and out of sight. *What the hell . . . ?*

I walked back to the stairs, where Evi and Telaris were peering down at us through the metal steps and framework.

“Did the boy just come up?” I yelled at them.

“He did. Ran past and vanished,” Telaris replied.

“Can you still see him?”

“No. *Mashara* is not happy about this, Delegate.”

In honesty, I couldn’t say I liked this any better than they did, but I hated to think I had come for nothing.

While I climbed the stairs, looking at Thayu’s heels, I heard the inevitable voice of my conscience, which always sounded like my father. *Proper business stays above the table, son. Don’t fall for the tricks of a con merchant.*

Thayu broke in. *Someone in that brain of yours has sense.*

Thayu, I need to know what this man is about.

You’ve promoted yourself to an investigating authority? There was a hint of playful sarcasm.

I can’t see anyone else doing it. Certainly no one else is being shadowed by these people.

You’re crazy.

That’s been said before. Many times, most often by Eva’s father.

I reached the top of the stairs, Thayu behind me.

“What now?” she asked.

“Why don’t we try to find that boy and walk around for a bit? I told the staff we’d be going to the markets, so we might as well. Just follow close behind and keep an eye out, *mashara*.”

The train had long since left the station, and all passengers had vanished into the miserable wet day. A lone guard paced the

platform and a woman sat on a bench, surrounded by a ring of baskets. A homeless peddler, I guessed. The city hosted plenty of them.

In spite of the rain, the markets burst with colour. Bright yellow, pink, orange, one canopy was brighter than the next. Underneath, vendors slaved over vats of steaming water, lowering cooking pots and pulling them back out. The smell of sulphur was everywhere. One could not make a fire in Barresh, courtesy of the megon nut trees, which grew along waterlines. The oil exuded by the tree's flowers was the most powerful fire retardant known in the universe. In Barresh, it coated every surface. As a result, the local cuisine didn't include anything that required a fire to cook. Eirani's bread was boiled in the water of hot springs that was piped into the kitchen.

In that light, the Coldi woman selling deep-fried food from a pan of bubbling oil had to be a novelty, and a popular one at that. Everywhere in the crowd people walked around nibbling golden, curly things from bags she sold. The smells that rose from the pan were heavenly. Memories flowed. Spicy hot Asian food, fish and chips on the beach, meals I'd shared with people I loved, none of whom were here. My parents, Inaru, Nicha—

"You must try this," Thayu said.

Before I knew it, she had taken a bag from the stallholder and pushed it into my hands. Steam curled up from it, spreading a delicious smell.

I stood there, feeling like an idiot. Now what? Coldi presented each other food as courtship rituals.

Just try it. I'm not trying to buy you. Thayu's eyes met mine.

Heat rising to my cheeks, I picked up one of the deep-fried curls and put it into my mouth. Tangy, hot, crispy, the piece was gone within a second.

I took a bigger piece.

She fished a curl from the bag. "Is it good?"

I nodded, my mouth full. "What are they?"

She picked up another piece with a yellow-skinned index finger and middle finger, as Coldi often did.

“I’ll tell you later.”

Ah—right. Coldi didn’t eat the meat from invertebrate animals, so they were probably some kind of slug or worm.

“Have another one?” She dangled it before my mouth.

You weren’t trying to buy me, remember?

The skin around her eyes crinkled as if she wanted to say *What if I was?* Through the feeder, I sensed a warm feeling, of a type I didn’t recognise from Nicha. And yet, I knew what it was, and I pushed it as far back as I could.

I couldn’t . . .

I wouldn’t . . .

Eva . . .

I turned away, holding out the bag to the guards. “*Mashara*, you should try some.” I had to clear my throat. My heart hammered in my chest.

Both Indrahui refused. I had never seen either man eat anything. I didn’t even know where they ate or slept, or where they bathed. I didn’t know if they had families, or if they were brothers or lovers, or if they had lovers, far away from here.

“Please, *mashara*, treat this as a day out as well.”

“When we’re with the Delegate, *mashara* is on duty.”

Very proper.

We had started walking again, past clothing stalls, barbers, fabric sellers, jewellery makers, stalls with furniture, fortunetellers. The rain pattered on the canvas roofs, but no one took any notice. People talked, argued, shared drinks, tried to convince others of their political views. Every now and then, we passed little islands of high-tech, where some vendor sold gadgetry, but for the most part, the markets were about locally-produced food and clothing, about services and about meeting each other.

I looked at necklaces, trying them on Thayu’s soft-skinned neck, imagining how they would look on Eva—and failing. I hadn’t been

away long, but I already had trouble visualising what Eva looked like, how her voice sounded and what she liked wearing. Velvet Victorian-style dresses with deep necklines. Perfect for a pretty pendant.

Instead, I asked Evi and Telaris for their opinions on necklaces—they had seen Eva after all—but they remained stiff-faced about the subject of my impending marriage. All right, I knew they didn't agree with my choice.

I also looked out in case I saw something that would solve my shaving conundrum. I tried fish knives, fruit knives, scalpels, cutting myself a few times, but no one had razors, and the redness on my cheeks was starting to develop into a rash.

By the time the light faded into a darker grey, I decided it was time to head back. I had bought a necklace, established that no one in the city needed to shave so there was no equipment for doing so, and now merchants were packing up for the day.

And then there was that boy again, sitting on a wall on the corner of an alley. A skinny thing of maybe ten, all arms and legs and a head full of curly, honey-coloured hair. His eyes were blue. Unlike that of the locals, his skin was deathly pale. I didn't need to see the long fingers and wide shoulders.

He was Aghyrian.

"Delegate Cory Wilson?" he said, in a clear voice.

"What is this game? We are here to see Mr Renkati." I figured the boy had already seen us together, and it was pointless to pretend I'd come alone. "Who are you?"

The boy shook his head. "Amoro Renkati?"

"Yes, that's who we're here to see. Are you taking us to him?"

He stepped back and beckoned.

Thayu and the two guards moved closer behind me.

"Tell him to get his master to meet us here, Delegate," Telaris said, his voice low.

"I don't think he speaks Coldi."

Telaris pushed to the front and spoke in various languages,

neither of which changed the blank look on the boy's face. When Thayu offered him her translator, he bolted into an alley between two houses. He stopped at the end.

Evi and Telaris exchanged looks.

"*Mashara* advises the Delegate to wait here or go back," Telaris said. "If this man wants to talk to the Delegate, he will have to come to the *gamra* island."

Sensible, so sensible. I understood their position, totally.

Except it wouldn't solve anything. Renkati wouldn't come, because otherwise he already would have.

The boy, apparently still waiting, climbed on top of a garden all and sat there, his legs dangling.

I gestured the guards and Thayu closer.

"*Mashara*, I'm afraid I don't see a choice but to follow him. I want to know what it is about; I need to know. These people are somehow tied up with the information Ezhya Palayi wants. So I am going to follow him. Stay close behind me. Thayu, if you could walk in front of me. I'm sorry, but I . . ." As a diplomat, I made a point of not carrying arms.

Thayu nodded. She dug in a pocket strapped to her leg. I couldn't see what she took out, but her hand, radiating warmth, slipped something in the pocket of my jacket. I stuck my hand in and half-withdrew a disk-shaped object. A small screen at the front of the disk gave the time in four different notations.

I gather this is not a normal timer?

Press the screen, hard. It fires, once only. Use it well, only in emergency.

Thank you. Hating guns was only noble until you faced armed opposition.

"If, for some reason we become separated, or the feeder won't work, use the tracker." She pressed a button on her listening device, and then did the same for me. A light flashed. "This connects to my comm unit. Press it if there is trouble. No need to speak."

I nodded, silently. Noticed how the skin of her fingers had gone white.

“Aren’t you feeling the cold?”

She shrugged, and looked away. Damn it. She was cold, I could feel it. I’d tell Eirani to make her some hot soup when we came back, and I would have a stern word with the kitchen to provide her with red-coded food. Poisons, as Eirani loved to call them. Thayu’s body needed them to stay healthy.

We entered the alley, between the back gates of yards and gnarled trunks of huge trees, the foliage of which was thick and lush and drippy. The boy jumped off the wall and ran forward. At the end of the alley, we came to an oasis of leafy trees, cordoned off by high walls marking the yards of surrounding houses. Steam rose lazily from a pool in the centre; raindrops made little ring patterns on the surface. Gnarled trees grew on the sides, roots bulging over stone.

The boy waited on the other side in the semidarkness, in the company of a broader figure, a keihu local, a thickset character with meaty arms and a groove down the middle of his nose. He wore a calf-length garment that was wide like a kaftan.

“Are you Delegate Cory Wilson?” Heavily accented.

“Yes. Who are you? Do you represent Renkati?” I didn’t bother with formal pronouns; they would be wasted on locals anyway.

“We’ve been asked to meet you.”

“Why all this secrecy?”

“We will explain. The situation is delicate. Your support is appreciated.”

Shit and shit. This excursion had been my idea, and there was no going back, not if I wanted to know what Renkati was about. But I really, *really* didn’t like this sneaking in alleys. And so far I hadn’t agreed to any kind of support.

Thayu’s eyes met mine. *Be alert.*

I could only feel guilt. I had brought her here, and trouble might follow.

She was wise enough not to offer her opinion on the matter.

I followed the man into another alley. He was shorter than me, about Thayu's height, but three times as wide in the waist.

No one spoke. Thayu walked with the agility of a panther ready to spring. Evi's and Telaris' green eyes took in every detail of the surrounding buildings. Their hands never strayed below their waists, ready to grab the guns from their arm brackets at the slightest provocation.

Our guide plodded through a maze of back alleys, up and down quaint stone steps, under overhanging flowering bushes that dripped water on us. I tried to remember the way, but the usual landmarks for orientation—the suns and the golden rock wall of the escarpment—hid behind clouds. It was also getting dark. For a while I thought that the guide was deliberately confusing us by using only back alleys, but we never passed any wider streets. Houses, low and built from ochre stone, crowded together in a way that convinced me there *was* no main street. In Barresh, boats and trains between islands were the main traffic. And little trolleys on rails. There were plenty of those.

Rain fell heavier. Thayu gave a single shiver. For a few seconds, her eyes lost that lion-like alertness.

You're freezing.

She didn't reply to that.

I was just about to ask our guide if we were going to get some place soon when we reached an alley that ran past a continuous wall, a fortress of stone and mortar. I glanced up into the drizzle, and sensed Thayu doing the same.

The building takes up an entire block.

I didn't know how she got this information so quickly, but I didn't question it.

Our guide led us to the only door in that solid wall, a thick wooden affair that opened noiselessly, although it looked like the type of door that would have creaked. Must be the wet.

We entered the courtyard beyond, facing a featureless stone

building. Black, soot-like moss covered the paving except for a well-worn path that led directly to an arched entrance.

Our guide turned right into a room where light pearls cast their greenish glow over stone walls. A desk stood in the middle of the room, and cupboards lined the walls. Through the glass in the doors, the light reflected from the silky surfaces of more types of gun than I knew existed.

“This is where we leave weapons.” The guide said.

A local woman bustled in through a door. She eyed the guards, then Thayu, and shook her head. “Definitely not allowed inside.”

Thayu?

A harsh squeak. Garbled sound.

Thayu?

She squinted. I didn’t know if she heard the same noise, but the feeder’s signal was very weak.

. . . interference. Don’t know what’s causing it.

She’s not going to allow you in. What should we do?

Leave it to me.

I looked over my shoulder, where Evi and Telaris stood rigid. One did *not* ask Indrahui guards to leave their weapons behind. I suspected these men took their weapons to bed, if ever they slept.

The guide said, “No one goes armed inside this building. We’re a peaceful community. If it worries you, you can stay here. We will take the Delegate to a room next to this one.”

Evi and Telaris glanced at each other. They probably didn’t like it.

“*Mashara*, I’m going to a meeting,” I said. My eyes met Evi’s. He knew just as well as I did that this was no ordinary meeting, but damn it, I did not want to bail out now.

“I’ll come.” Taking a breath through flaring nostrils, Thayu unstrapped the gun from her arm and flung it into Evi’s hands. A show—I knew. She would have other weapons. Or so I hoped. Evi still scowled.

Thayu flicked me a warning glance. *. . . listening in . . .*

careful . . .

What?

The high-pitched noise whined in my brain.

She shook her head, probably trying to tell me not to use the feeder.

I raked my hand through my hair and pulled the feeder's legs to lift it ever so slightly from my skin. The noise stopped. But the feeder wouldn't stay detached like this, programmed as it was to connect with the patch in my brain. Already, the legs moved to reattach itself. I resisted an urge to scratch the spot. When it sent a warm burst through my head, I blocked it.

The guide searched Thayu, and found nothing. Then it was my turn. He found the timer and turned it over in his hands. My heart thudded in my throat, but he handed it back to me. I slipped it into the safety of my pocket. Phew.

Finally, he asked the two of us to follow.

The two guards took up their usual positions, one on either side of the door, their hands behind their backs. Already, I longed for their comforting obsidian presence. I'd left them behind when I went to see Sirkonen, and look what had happened. This venue was much less safe. Into the lion's den indeed.

A short passageway led to a glass-covered courtyard, full of people.

Some sort of cafeteria, or canteen, with rows of tables, where many people sat sharing drinks and talking. A serving robot trundled between tables, avoiding wayward chairs and planter boxes overflowing with greenery.

The knot of muscles in my neck relaxed. I checked my tracker—there were now two lights—one flashing quickly for Thayu next to me, the other flashing more slowly for the two guards.

The guide led us across the courtyard, zigzagging between tables. Many of the cafe's patrons turned. Eyebrows rose, whispers travelled amongst the varied crowd. In fact, I didn't think I had ever seen so many different kinds of people outside *zhamata*.

Without exception, these people *glared* at Thayu.

The guide stopped at a table where a man sat in the shade of a potted tree. The guide bowed and the man returned his greeting, but I didn't recognise what language they spoke.

Dressed in a khaki kaftan, he looked to be a local, but there was something familiar about him. I wracked my brains trying to think where in the past few days I had met this olive-skinned man with curly greying hair. Any of the keihu locals? A Barresh councillor? Mr Renkati? When the guide beckoned me closer, I saw the whiteness covering the man's irises, which accounted for his emotionless stare. A tilt of the head—he was listening, but *not* meeting my eyes, because he couldn't.

I also realised he was not local. He *shaved*. And that narrowed the possibilities as to who he was to exactly one person.

My heart racing, I sat down. Folded my hands on the table, studying him. I *had* met him before, after all, a long time ago, when I was young and he could still see.

“Seymour Kershaw?”

He smiled and inclined his head.

“Mr Wilson, I presume?” In an odd kind of Isla with a trace of an American twang.

Seymour Kershaw indeed.

A recovering breath, and another one, and then a chilling thought: had Sirkonen known?

“Do you know that everyone on Earth thinks you're dead?”

He chuckled. “Have you been asked to look for my body?”

“I don't think it's funny.” I fought to keep my voice even. On Earth people fought in this man's name, and he sat here without a care in the world—laughing about it even.

Kershaw's face sobered. “You're right, of course. And I can assure you, there is nothing funny about the situation.”

“Are you kept here against your will?”

“No, no. Not at all.”

“What then? Why let your family suffer? Do you know that . . .”

Heck, the movie. A feeling of cold went through me, and then another thought. "You're Amoro Renkati?" The trick of the century: sponsor a movie which portrays your own death.

"Me? No." He spread his hands. "This is Amoro Renkati."

The truth sank in. "Amoro Renkati isn't a person. It's an organisation."

"That's correct. In case you're wondering, it means Enlightened Path."

"In Aghyrian." And wasn't there once a terrorist organisation on Earth with a name very much like it?

"Yes," Kershaw confirmed my guess.

And *that* was probably where Marin Federza fitted in. *We will support you* he had said, *we* being this organisation, or the Aghyrians. The enemy were the Coldi, who had made some very blatant attempts to annex certain powers on Earth, and who were still the most likely candidates to have killed Sirkonen.

I glanced at all those faces in the courtyard. Kedrasi, Indrahui, Damarcian, and people from many other races, at least two hundred of them, all in local khaki dress. Many still glared openly at Thayu.

There were not just a few dissenting voices. It was a political movement, and likely their invitation of me to the complex, heck, even their offering of their apartment for my use, was a calculated gesture. I had wondered when I would be called upon to honour the unspoken agreement I had entered by accepting the accommodation. It seemed that time was now.

It also seemed that Chief Delegate Akhtari was fully aware of the situation. She had supplied me with a *zhayma* who had obvious loyalties to Asto, and put me into the hands of an organisation which was against Asto. What was that gesture supposed to mean?

She wanted me to take a stance.

She wanted me to evaluate matters as an outsider.

She wanted me to be a referee.

My position had been bumped up at least ten notches in

importance. And that was typical *gamra* politics, too. At Nations of Earth, I would have received briefings; here, I was thrown into the situation unprepared. Sometimes I believed that innocent blundering was part of their way to test novices in the political game, a tactic they'd applied to me ever since I arrived.

And that annoyed me, because, damn it, there was far too much at stake to risk stupid mistakes through ignorance.

I needed space to think.

"Tell me, how did you become involved with these people?"

Kershaw leaned forward on the table. "Well, like you, I arrived in Barresh full of ideals and plans, but almost immediately things happened to me that had not been planned. Before I left, I had an agreement that I would have a small office with two staff. The people in question, two Indrahui, I had met before. But when I arrived, the two weren't here. I was informed that they had been caught up in the civil unrest at Indrahui and couldn't join me for the foreseeable future. Instead, someone in the upper hierarchy appointed a single person, a Coldi woman, to replace them. This woman knew nothing about my situation or about Earth, and within a few days of starting, she had made it clear that she expected favours of me. She expected to share my apartment and my bed, for chrissakes."

It was fairly well-known in diplomatic circles that Kershaw's long-time partner, who had died in an accident, had been male.

"More than that. When I started prying into who she was, I found that she counted a number of Asto spies amongst her friends. She was passing information back to them. Personal information."

I couldn't help but feel chilled. I might have reconciled with Thayu, but this sounded horribly similar to my situation. "Did you find out what they did with this information? Who wanted it, and why?"

"I went and asked, didn't I?" There was a tone of belligerence in his voice.

"Did anyone tell you?" I imagined him barging into Delegate

Akhtari's office, and demanding why there was listening equipment in his living quarters—

"They said it was nothing unusual. I demanded that everything be taken out and dismantled. I demanded to have my original staff returned to me."

Perfectly reasonable demands, by Earth standards, but—

"They wouldn't comply, so I ripped all the cables out myself, and I told the lady that she could leave my employment, unless she was willing to take orders only from me. She left."

"That would have made some people happy." I let sarcasm into my voice.

"How did you guess?" Equally sarcastic.

"They would have viewed that as a fracture in *imayu*, the loyalty network."

"Damn the network. She just couldn't stand it that I'd outsmarted her. So she went on a rampage and deleted all my accounts and connections, and so I looked her up and confronted her. She wouldn't see me, but next thing, there was this piece of paper—"

"A writ."

He turned his head to me, lifting one eyebrow. "You know all about this, do you?"

I wasn't sure if he was sarcastic. "I know enough to see that these misunderstandings could have led to a writ. What was it for?"

He snorted. "Would you believe it? Her clothes, her personal items and her reader. But you know, there was spy stuff on that reader. Material I needed to prove that someone was passing my correspondence with Earth to some higher authority in Asto."

Damn, this got worse and worse.

I wanted to tell him that this was supposed to happen, that every delegate was under constant scrutiny. At the same time, my anger grew. None of this was Kershaw's fault. He was untrained, and not the right type of character for this job.

"I know what you're thinking, Mr Wilson. You're thinking *poor Kershaw, back then we knew nothing. We know a lot more these days*"?

"We *do* know a lot more. These people don't react the same way we do. You can't apply our values to their deeds. The woman appointed to replace your assistants thought she was doing what the job required. They don't distinguish between family and work spheres of their lives. They need to work with an equal, and need to fit into their part of society. It's pathological."

"That may be, but don't tell me that you, too, are not experiencing invasion of your private domain by Coldi people with connections you are not entirely sure about."

Damn. After meeting Ezhya Palayi, I'd wallpapered over my concerns in that direction. Because I didn't even completely understand Nicha's connections, because I'd given up hope of ever fully understanding them. Thayu had volunteered her connection with the spy division easily enough, but what else was there?

My heart was thudding against my ribs. I glanced over my shoulder at Thayu, who wouldn't understand a word of this conversation. I found it hard to believe that she might be part of a bigger plot, but then again, what did I know? What did any of us really understand about these people?

"I can tell it concerns you," Kershaw concluded. "So let me tell you our view. This is all official, by the way; that's why I haven't asked your minder to leave you. She already knows this."

How did he know that Thayu was Coldi and that she was with me and that she was female? He was blind.

"You believe that if we understand the differences between the many peoples of *gamra*, we can work out a workable agreement."

"I do, but—"

"Good, then we agree. With one exception. Have you noticed, in your case, as it was in mine, who has been doing all the adapting? That would be you, right? Or us. All of us in this room. Have you noticed who has not been doing any adapting?"

Yes, this was about the Coldi.

“I guess I don’t have to tell you that either. When more than half the votes in *gamra* are yours, do you need to adapt? When you can claim that your social structure, your instinct, whatever, justifies your repression of other people, justifies the bullying, the invasions, do you truly respect everyone else in the neighbourhood? It is our belief that this isn’t the case. They are happy to play by all the rules, as long as they can be chief. This is not something we can change. The need to dominate is endemic in the Coldi. It’s part of their genetic makeup. Meanwhile, they will invade Earth. Not by force, but by stealth. They give us their technology as they already have for such a long time, and eventually, they’ll demand something in return.”

All my worries returned. Kershaw had much more experience than I. I couldn’t prove that he was wrong; in fact, there were some signs that he might be right.

There was a Coldi proverb: lend the neighbours mushrooms and harvest bread—a deed done for another put the receiving party in debt. Asto had shared with Earth a lot of its technology. It wasn’t obvious, and had gone on for a long time, but what if, just if, Asto wanted something in return, such as was Coldi custom? If all those little bugs in computer chips amounted to something coherent? Some paranoid people on Earth were arguing just this in ever-louder voices. Could they be right?

No—no. The first Coldi settlers on Earth, the ones to settle very quietly on the Greek islands in the 1960’s were *refugees* from Misha’s totalitarian regime. They weren’t inclined to be organised. Besides, if such a coordinated master plan existed, wouldn’t it have been activated in time of stress, such as—?

Now.

And damn it, I didn’t know what was happening on Earth. Danziger was playing hard to get, because he didn’t trust me.

I swallowed. *Keep your options open, Mr Wilson.*

I didn’t trust Danziger. I didn’t trust Ezhya Palayi either.

“So, if, for a moment I believed you were right, what is it that Amoro Renkati wishes to do to fight it?”

“Not fight it, Mr Wilson. You cannot fight Asto and win. After your experience with the bully today, you will know that. But we can simply ignore them. Break away.”

“Break away?”

“Start again, away from Asto. Start our own group of entities who will not be overwhelmed by the juggernaut.”

“Away from *gamra*?”

“Precisely.”

“Who is *we*?” But a glance around the hall provided me with that answer. Sections of the Kedrasi, Indrahui and Damarcian population. No Coldi. Hence the vicious looks at Thayu. “All these people? Their governments?”

Kershaw held up his hands. “Not yet; no authorities as yet. We’re working on it. In fact, President Sirkonen was the first leader who said he’d join.”

Oh holy shit. I saw where this was going. “You’re saying Asto has killed him for that reason?”

“You’re moving a little fast, Mr Wilson. No one except the murderer knows who has killed President Sirkonen.”

I had heard better-veiled accusations. “Nations of Earth know about this, too?”

“No, and that is where we could use your help. When Sirkonen was killed, the negotiations broke down. We need to initiate talks with President Danziger and whoever takes over from him after the elections. We’d like to offer Nations of Earth an alternative to submitting to the tyranny of Asto. We’ll have our own trade, our own rules, and real democracy. All of it very attractive to Nations of Earth.”

And you’ll have war. I was sure of that. Coldi interests would hold no loyalties to these groups; there was a break in the network and nothing would hold them back from violent action. And on top of that . . .

“You can form an independent group, but aren’t you forgetting that *gamra* controls the Exchange? You’ll be denied access and can’t travel.”

Kershaw smiled. “That’s true, but let’s just say that we’ve found some technology to overcome that problem.”

“You have?” Aghyrian technology, I was sure. “It would have to be a pretty major operation.” In the early days of its operation, just the auxiliary equipment of the Athens Exchange would consume so much power as to leave the city in the dark. No one knew about it until *gamra* came clean and legalised the illegal network node. Exchange technology was incredibly powerful and expensive, and needed more than a backyard operation to run.

“There have been some major technological breakthroughs,” Kershaw said. “The prototypes we have are both much smaller and more efficient in energy. If we use this technology to set up an alternative network, prices of transport would fall considerably.”

Exactly in line with Danziger’s objections to the current operation of the Exchange.

“I would be interested in seeing that technology.”

He hesitated.

“I’m a diplomat. I keep secrets for a living. If I’m to understand and argue your point, and I will be seeing President Danziger soon, I want to see what you’ve got.” Oh yes, I could play the bluff card, too.

“All right. Come with me, Mr Wilson.”

FOR A MAN whose eyes were white with cataracts, Kershaw rose in a manner much more fluid than I expected. He didn't bash into the table either, or hit his head on an overhanging branch. Familiarity with the environment?

Thayu rose, tigerlike, but waited until the others had started moving. First Kershaw, greeting a few people in the hall—how could he see them?—then me, with her close behind.

Many in the crowd eyed us all the way to the door. When we left the courtyard, I found myself walking next to Kershaw. His eyes stared straight ahead and didn't move.

We went from the hall into a passage that faded into darkness, with the occasional pinprick of light, and any number of doors and passages on either side. We turned left, and then right in dark stone corridors. This place was like a warren.

Thayu?

The feeder remained silent.

A couple of others had joined us, no more than dark shapes slithering out of doorways and falling into step behind me. I checked the tracker on my arm. The light that indicated the two guards flickered slower than before. The other light, indicating Thayu, also blinked more slowly.

Heart thudding, I glanced over my shoulder, but saw nothing except walking silhouettes of men, probably Indrahui also, judging by their height.

"Thayu?"

“She’s coming,” Kershaw grumbled in a what-are-you-worried-about tone.

“How can you. . . ?”

“See?” He completed the sentence for me. “I see very well, Mr Wilson. Your lady guard is just behind you.”

I glanced over my shoulder and caught a glimpse of Thayu’s body armour. Relaxed.

“I’m sorry, I thought you were—”

“Blind? I was, thanks to cancer in my eyes from high UV at Taurus, but my friends here have fixed that up.”

With eyes that looked like a thick soup of mist?

“If you can see, what colour is my shirt?”

“Blue.”

That would have been correct had I been wearing my *gamra* uniform, which I wasn’t. So . . . was he bluffing? Guessing? Did he know the behaviour of his men so well?

He laughed. “You’re right, Mr Wilson, my eyes are totally blind. I have infused into my brain a patch that allows me to see like a bat. That’s the power of technology I’m about to show you.”

The corridor ended in another room, empty except for a spiral staircase. Kershaw led the way up and around, and around into some sort of tower. Small lights dotted the circular walls, neatly stuccoed and with impressions of various shapes—little flowers and animals.

I looked over my shoulder, but saw nothing except unfamiliar men, Indrahui indeed.

We went around the circular tower wall twice before we emerged through a rectangular opening under a dome of glass. Low clouds scudded overhead, discharging a light spit of rain. On one side, the room looked out into a sparsely-lit courtyard, where a potted plant waving in the wind threw eerie shadows on the earthen ground. Two levels of arched galleries surrounded the courtyard. Empty balconies and closed doors.

In the middle of the glasshouse room stood a pentagonal bench.

One person sat there, at the controls of a machine which reminded me of the hub in my apartment; two more people stood behind him, silhouetted only by the lights from the building below.

Kershaw said a few words, presumably a greeting.

No one replied. Their eyes glinted at me in silent suspicion.

The men following us took up positions by the top of the stairs. Not armed—huh? They looked suspiciously like security. Where was Thayu? I shifted my sleeve up slightly. The light that indicated Thayu blinked slower still.

Kershaw exchanged a few words with the man behind the control panel.

“Please realise that you are very privileged to come up here.”

“Thank you, but I’d like to know where my *zhayma* is first.”

“Downstairs. She’ll wait there.”

“But I—”

“Really, Mr Wilson, don’t worry. She is just waiting. With her connections, we cannot allow her inside. Surely, you understand that.”

This was stupid. He had to know that I could share the information with her as soon as we left the building.

The seated man brought up a single white light on a holographic display, and its glow lit up the faces of the others in the room.

The two on either side of Kershaw were a man and a woman, their faces pale-skinned, with high cheekbones. The man had straight and very dark hair, his eyes black. The woman had to be older because veins corded the back of her long-fingered hands, although her hair was the colour of honey and curled softly around her face. Her eyes were the clearest green I had ever seen, like glass bottles.

Aghyrians, both of them, sure enough.

“Watch closely, Mr Wilson, and know this is only a prototype.”

An image flickered into the air. A pink, dust-covered planet, intersected by deep grooves. Asto. The image zoomed out until the

planet was only a dot and was joined by a second one: Ceren.

The operator peered at the screen before him, seemed to spot something, and shifted the image. Ceren again, now closer, and compared to Asto, compared to Earth even, obscenely green. A tiny green dot moved over the surface of the planet.

“Shuttle from Kedras,” the operator said, in curt Coldi, sliding some controls, his eyes on the moving dot in the projection.

Kershaw grinned. “Watch.”

There was an intense hum that vibrated inside my chest. From somewhere on the roof of the building a beam of dark red light shot out. It showed up like a thread on the holographic image, snaking through the sky. It hit the little dot that was the approaching craft and pushed it a good deal further, all in the space of a split second.

In the distance, there was a sound like thunder which rattled the glass in the windows.

My heart pounded as I tried not to meet Kershaw’s eyes. He said Sirkonen had agreed with them? Agreed or been bullied into agreeing? And then murdered when things didn’t go as planned? Here was my proof. The red flash. They had used this machine or something like it to move part of the window to kill Sirkonen. It had always been their intent to kill him, not me, and the datastick . . . did they know I had it?

I knew what had to be on it: a letter from Sirkonen to me with what he had found out about these people. Names, contact details. A warning about why, and how.

I swallowed, my mouth dry, and realised I had to say something, anything. “A one-way Exchange interaction?” The Exchange was safe because it was a three-way interaction and needed confirmation from all involved parties: from the sending entity, the receiving entity and the transferred craft.

“It’s called a sling, and the Aghyrians had already worked out the theory at the time of the meteorite impact so that space-travelling vessels could propel themselves across space, no need for

a receiving reference point. It means that we won't need the existing Exchange network anymore."

"And there is . . . only one of these machines?" Oh, a dangerous question, Delegate.

"Yes, we don't need many to maintain a network."

I felt sick. If these people were allowed to break away from *gamra*, and build a larger version of this machine, they could sling *others* across space without their knowledge. Use this technology as a weapon. Move the opposition into mid space, with no way to get back. That was just the sort of thing *gamra* was set up to prevent.

"That is the deal, Mr Wilson. Nations of Earth could be part of this development. President Sirkonen was very excited about this technology."

No, he wasn't. It killed him. Did they realise I had been with Sirkonen when they killed him? They had to know. So what were they doing? Sounding me out. Is he safe? Can we buy his vote? If I ever got out of this room alive.

Over on the horizon, over waterlogged roofs, searchlights cut through the rain, and lights flashed. The blaring of a siren drifted on the wind. An emergency at the airport. They'd been testing this equipment for the past few days—and—

No one—including Kershaw—could see the red light. They didn't *know* I knew. Did they even realise the red light was there?

I chose my words as carefully as I could. "I'd say this technology is rather . . . dangerous. If I am to consider your proposal, and take messages to Danziger, I think I need to know that it's safe."

"Oh, it is safe," Kershaw said.

"I want guarantees," I said. "Written in clear language. Scientifically explaining it, why it's as safe as the current technology." My mind worked hard. How was I going to get out of here?

"That can be arranged," Kershaw said.

"All right. I will await that information. You know where to

contact me.”

I turned to the entrance of the stairs.

“A moment, Mr Wilson.”

“Yes?” Something in the tone of his voice chilled me deeply. It was a cold tone, one that said, *You don't think we're going to let you leave without a promise, do you?*

I fumbled for the tracker. My fingers had found the alarm button, and I pressed it as far down as I could. I slid my hand out of my sleeve.

Kershaw said a few words and a man sprang into action. The next moment, the huge Indrahui guard had my arms behind my back.

“Hey, let me go!”

Another man switched on a light at Kershaw's back. A pool of golden light showed a table with, on its polished wood surface, a medico box of the foldout type. There were some frightfully thick needles, attached to a syringelike apparatus with a gunlike trigger. A tiny object of metal, looking like a piece of wire, lay on the work surface, looking, for all I could see, like a piece of wire. That was a security implant, as was used in prisons. It sent signals to the wearer's brain causing confusion or headaches. More sophisticated versions muddled with the wearer's memories.

I stiffened. “You can't do this.”

“I don't think you have a choice. This equipment—”

There was a shout, a voice in Coldi down the stairs. Thayu.

Stains of dirt marked her face, but the eyes that met mine glittered with relief.

Someone rose and ran through the room, yelling, “Grab her!”

I dug in my pocket. My fingers closed around the cool metal of the disk. In one motion, I rose, drew it out, and pointed it at the table. “Stand back!”

Kershaw cursed.

I turned and pointed the gun at their precious machine, willing my hands not to tremble. I had one shot to get it right.

Kershaw shuffled between the gun and the machine. “Don’t do anything you’ll regret.”

I took a few paces towards the stairs. “No one is going to meddle with my memory.”

“Please Mr Wilson. Put that gun away. It is you and I who are at risk here. These are not normal people.”

“I don’t care who these people are. What I care about is this: your machine is a weapon, and I’ll make sure it won’t be used as such.”

He shouted.

I didn’t think, I didn’t question; I pressed the screen on the disk.

It fired. Lit the room in a bright blue beam of light, which hit the assailant square in the chest. The Aghyrian operator.

Light crackled over the man’s clothing, in his hair. His eyes widened and for an eerie moment that seemed to go on forever, he stumbled. But he didn’t fall. Blue light blazed from his eyes, and a crackle of lightning trailed up his arm. He still didn’t fall, but stood there, like a zombie. He blinked, then brushed the lightning off his arm as if it were a bit of dirt. Reached out . . .

A bolt of light hissed through the room. Blinded me.

Something pulled at the back of my shirt, hard. I crashed flat on my back. The light whooshed over my head and hit the opposite wall, ricocheting to the ceiling.

I was dead, I was dead. I’d die here and people would make movies about how I went in to save Kershaw but failed.

Glass shattered. Smoke billowed.

Through all of this, I saw my father’s face, and my mother’s, and Erith’s, and my uncle’s: all the people I needed to protect from this dreadful device. And Thayu—I’d led her into danger. Thayu and Nicha both.

Someone yanked on my clothes.

Not dead then.

I lifted my head, tasting blood in my mouth. Smoke filled the room with a chemical smell. Glass and debris lay everywhere. I

couldn't see Kershaw or any of the others, including the man who had thrown, or projected, the light, somehow, or whatever had happened.

"Cory, come!" Thayu said.

A harsh shout came from the other side of the room—it was too dark to see.

"Hurry!"

I scrambled up on hands and knees and launched myself head first down the stairs. I slid, bumping and trying to slow my fall by pushing against the wall. Rough stone scraped skin off my elbow.

I hit the bottom in a pathetic example of terribly unfit white human male.

Thayu, who had somehow followed me, pulled me to my feet. "Run!"

My mind clicked into gear. I ran. Had no idea where I was going. Up a flight of stairs. Footsteps followed, Thayu's, I hoped. Light flashed behind me, but I didn't look.

Thayu shouted directions. *Right, left, up, down.* I did as she told me, dazed, out of breath.

I came to a door, lifted the handle, but it was locked.

"Aside!"

A second to duck. Thayu bore down on the door hefting a metal bar over her head. A tremendous crash. Shards of wood scattered and bounced off the walls.

A moist breeze wafted in.

"Come." Thayu was already through the hole.

I scrambled through splinters out into the street.

I still clutched the disk, now useless.

"This way." Thayu grabbed my hand and pulled me into an alley, running at full speed, which was a good deal faster than I could run. I let myself be pulled along. Trying not to trip over my feet was the best I could do. Rain swept in my face, water splashed up my legs.

I couldn't go any faster. My breath ached in my lungs. Pain

stabbed my side. But Thayu pulled me and ran and ran. How she knew the way, I had no idea, but I had no breath to question. Flashes of light whizzed overhead. Someone had caught up.

Thayu stopped and pressed something cold and metallic into my hands. A charge gun.

I stammered, “How did you get that—”

“Not mine. Shoot at the trees, the walls. Don’t shoot at them or they’ll throw the charge back at us.” However they did this. Normal people just *died* when hit by a charge.

Shit. What sort of technology did they have?

She set the example, firing a volley of blue flashes into the walls at both sides of the alley. A rubbish bin disintegrated, spilling its contents on the pavement.

Then we were off again. Down the hill.

Down was good; we needed to get to the station which was somewhere on the shore. But I didn’t know which shore; it was too dark to see much, and the rain was pouring down in torrents that ran in my eyes. Thayu wasn’t doing much better, and I knew how much the water hampered her. The pavement, worn and smooth, became slippery under our feet.

“Stop!” She screeched to a halt in an alcove.

“What’s wrong?”

“Need . . . recharge. . . .” She was panting.

She fumbled in her pocket and pulled out a canister. A bright glow betrayed our position when she flipped off the lid.

“Shield the light!” I whispered.

She turned her back to me. I felt her indignation—the feeder was working again. Then I also felt guilty about being harsh on her. Coldi had very poor night vision and I didn’t even know if she could see the glow from the pearls, the glow that was like a beacon to me.

A shiver ran across her back.

Sorry.

The feeder returned a burst of warmth. I was forgiven.

She took out the spent pearl—with her fingers—jammed it in her pocket without burning herself and clicked the new one into place. Her skin steamed and I could feel her heat through my wet clothes. She needed to increase her body heat to be this active, but it wouldn't be long before her stamina ran out.

Do you know where we are?

“No.” In all likelihood, with her poor night vision, she couldn't even see me.

Where are Evi and Telaris?

Gone, I hope.

I felt sick. They might be in trouble because of me. I tightened my grip on the gun and blocked the alcove with my body, giving her time to recover. The chemical taste of the discharge was familiar in my mouth. I licked water off the back of my hand by way of rinsing my mouth, but that only made it worse.

Why is no one coming after us? Do you think we lost them?

Wouldn't count on it. Maybe they've set a trap.

We waited. A steady rain fell from the sky, pattering on uneven pavement and in puddles. We were about halfway up a sloping alley that, as far as I could see in the dark, zigzagged down the hill. Sparse lights burned in courtyards and windows.

Sounds of normal life—people talking, the occasional shard of music—drifted over the street.

A strange thought struck me. In that moment I thought I might die, I'd thought of protecting *gamra* from the implications of this invention, I'd thought of my life being made into a movie, I'd thought of my father and Erith. I'd even thought of Nicha and Thayu. Now I stood here protecting her, feeling the heat radiate from her skin, knowing what she felt or would soon feel through the feeder. She was Coldi, but I *understood* her.

And I knew, deep within me, that I was right and Kershaw and the rest of them were wrong.

Human philosophical historians talked of waves of expansion. The first wave of colonisation had been when people from different

continents “discovered” each other, followed by an understanding that regardless of skin colour we were all human. The second wave of colonisation had come when humanity established permanent populations on the Moon and later Mars, and when scientists discovered, quite by accident, that the anpar lines produced by the Exchange occurred naturally in some places, and so humanity had ventured to Taurus and New Taurus on its own steam, without intervention from *gamra*. The third wave of colonisation . . . no philosopher had mentioned a third wave as yet, but that was me, taking steps for humanity to rejoin the network of human species long ago seeded by the diaspora of the Aghyrians, truly immersing myself in human cultures that had no history on Earth, and feeling more comfortable with them than with my own.

It was a profoundly strange thought to have while standing holed up in an alcove sheltering Thayu from the rain, and it was a thought I should have voiced to Kershaw. He was wrong about the Coldi being too different from us to be part of humanity as a whole. Underneath the differences, we were all the same. If people on Earth had overcome discrimination based on race, then we could also overcome these problems.

A flash of lightning blazed over the city, showing, for a mere split second, a mass of houses, and over the roofs the station and the train line leading to the *gamra* island. I jerked my head. “Over there.”

Thayu peered into the rain.

“Run down the hill. You go first. I cover your back.”

Run was an order Thayu had no trouble following. I was flat out keeping up with her, having to stay close to the walls and watching for any possible pursuers. Once, I thought I heard footsteps behind us, but I couldn’t be sure. Down the hill we went, onto a small square dark in the shadow of trees. Thayu tripped over a tree root, but scrambled up before I could reach her. I didn’t miss how her hands trembled. She was weakening.

We kept going, through the shadows, onto the metal walkway.

The station. Empty except for a deserted train. Even the station attendant had gone.

Oh shit. If train services had stopped, how were we going to get home? But then I remembered the jetty, the boats.

“In here!” I swerved into the dark, down the steps that backtracked under the rails and ran onto the jetty. I jumped into a canoe. Thayu half-fell in after me and I drew a sodden cloth over both of us. We lay there, panting.

A single figure walked across the walkway. Someone called out; the man replied. He ran up the platform and bashed the door of the lifeless train.

The man went back to his comrade on the shore, and the two of them vanished, but their hollow footsteps echoed in the dark long after their silhouettes had gone.

Then there was only silence.

And the pattering of raindrops on the cloth.

And the buzzing and trilling of creatures amongst the reeds of the marsh.

Thayu was shivering uncontrollably. I slipped my arms around her waist and warmed her as much as I could.

We waited. The cloth that covered us stank of fish and must.

Thayu shivered and shivered. Her teeth chattered. I pulled the cloth closer around her, but I couldn’t offer her anything more. My own clothes were as wet as hers and my body temperature was too low for her. We had to do something; morning was a long time away.

In inky darkness, I moved my hands over the bottom of the boat and found the pushing pole.

I hefted myself to my knees, and untied the boat, wobbling. I lowered the pole over the side of the boat and plunged it into the water. Shit—that made a lot of noise. It found soft sand. I pushed; the boat drifted. “Here,” I whispered, holding the pole out to Thayu. “Do this, and keep yourself warm.”

She rose on her knees, large eyes glinting at the water.

Terrified, if Nicha's feelings about water were anything to go by. But she bit her lip and took the pole from me, plunging it once more in the water. The boat shot away from the jetty. She whispered, "Where to?"

I jerked my head at the island, along the silver rails. The sanctuary, *gamra* territory, where warm lights beckoned and delegates slept in blissful ignorance. Across a large body of frightening water. With someone who couldn't swim.

I PLUNGED THE POLE into the water, pushed, and heaved it out again, mechanically.

By the faint glow of the lights that illuminated the boulevard at the *gamra* complex, clumps of reeds showed up as mounds of blackness, but I hit many of them nevertheless; the railway line was a blurry line of silver to my right.

My arms ached, my legs ached, and rain sheeted down on me. I had long ago given up wiping it out of my eyes. Long ago, when I had taken the pole from Thayu, when she had dropped it in the water and we had almost lost it. I had told her, too harshly perhaps, that if she was that scared of water, she'd best get out of my way. Ages ago.

But we were relatively safe, or at least until Renkati breached the security perimeter of the *gamra* island.

Thayu just sat there, her legs pulled up against her body, sheltering under the oiled cloth. Even her feeder input had gone silent. Soaked, exhausted and filthy, I couldn't help but silently curse her. She was much stronger than I was. If she could pull herself together . . .

The boat clonked into the wooden pylons.

I grabbed the rope with stiff hands and tied it to the nearest post.

"Thayu, you can come out now. We're here."

She didn't move.

Don't tell me she's fallen sleep. Although deep inside, I knew that

her behaviour had been strange and my anger irrational. Thayu had never shown a sign of shirking her duty.

“Thayu?”

I yanked the cloth up. Her arms unlooped from her knees, and she slumped backwards against my legs. I lost my balance and had to lunge for a pylon to stop myself falling in the water. The boat went the other way. For some precarious seconds, I hung between boat and jetty, trying desperately to keep my feet in the wobbling boat.

Oh, fuck.

I pulled, with my feet, butt ungraciously in the air. The boat moved closer.

Only when I sat on my knees, gasping, on the wet bench in the boat, did I realise that there had been no reaction from Thayu.

She had slumped against the side. Her eyes were half-open, her hand uncharacteristically cool.

“Thayu!” I shook her.

She drew a shuddering breath. There was no response from the feeder.

“Thayu, get up.” I was almost screaming now. All sorts of horrible stories came to me about the effects of hypothermia on Coldi people. It was their major weakness, and could easily lead to death. It set in much sooner than in races not suited to high temperatures, and races with a fixed body temperature. The Coldi body simply lowered the temperature too much, and shut down vital processes as a result.

I jumped to my feet, hauling Thayu up. “Wake up, wake up.”

She mumbled something unintelligible.

With shaking arms and trembling legs, I heaved and pushed her up the jetty. It still rained, and in the pitch darkness I could discern no one to help me.

I draped one of her arms over my shoulder and pulled her to her feet, then tried to get her to walk, but she was so still; she didn’t even shiver.

So, I dragged her to the end of the pier, her feet scraping over the boards, onto the quay and to the back entrance of the building. Into the courtyard.

At the bottom of the stairs, she slipped from my grip onto the steps, awkwardly landing on her side like a bag of potatoes.

“Thayu!”

I pulled her up, but she would not stand by herself, so I slid one arm under her back at the shoulder blades, and one under her knees and lifted her. I wasn’t particularly strong, and although she was shorter than me, she was much more muscular and heavy. My arms were screaming by the time I walked onto the gallery, but sheer determination kept me going. I was *not* going to leave her alone, after all she had done for me. I was *not* going to lose another *zhayma*.

I called out, “*Mashara!*”

There was no one at the door. Where were Evi and Telaris? I couldn’t get in without them, unless I had the access card. I set Thayu down against the balustrade and fumbled through her pockets. Where was hers?

Confound it. No time. I bashed on the door. “Eirani, open up!”

Nothing.

Back to Thayu’s pockets. Cards, keys, pearl-money, items of which I could only guess the function. Right. This was definitely the last time I left my security anywhere. Just then I closed my hand on Thayu’s keycard.

I yanked Thayu up again, dragged her to the door, held her card up to the panel; the door slid open.

I stumbled through, looking into the astonished face of Eirani, who came running into the hall wrapped in a sarong.

“Muri! The guards are all out looking for you. They came back saying that there had been shooting and . . .” Her mouth fell open. “Is she—”

“Into the bathroom.”

Eirani ran ahead, making sure to roll the door aside properly so

I could get through.

In the humidity of the bathroom, I lowered Thayu onto the floor. Her head lolled back. Strands of hair had escaped from her ponytail and clung to pale lips.

Eirani helped me peel off her sodden overgarments.

“It was silly of the Delegate to go out alone.”

“I will do it again. Tell your bosses this: as long as they resort to manipulation of people’s minds, no one will support them.”

She said nothing, recognising defeat perhaps; who was to say? I was too angry to care.

The temperature-control suit was harder to get off Thayu’s limp form, but it would be a hindrance getting her temperature back up to normal, insulating her body from heat as well as cold. It clung to her skin like rubber, and we had to pull so hard I feared we would damage something. Finally, we had it off.

I jumped into the pool with my clothes on and held her on my lap, while Eirani poured hot water over her head and shoulders. If it was possible to sweat underwater, I did.

After Eirani had made many trips to the hot well, a bit of colour came back into Thayu’s face. Her eyes were still closed, but her breath was regular. I even got a few indistinct responses from the feeder.

Eirani helped me heave her out of the pool, where we rubbed her with towels until her skin glowed. I carried her into my bedroom and put her gently on the bed, then found all the sheets, covers and even the flattened-possum rug to put over her. She was now visibly shivering, and that was an improvement.

I grabbed my reader and told Eirani, “I’ll sit with her. You can go to bed now.”

Eirani left. I found the infusor band, looped it around my arm and inserted a capsule. When the contents were gone, I clicked in another one.

Shivering with the effect, almost feeling the heat of my own body, I slipped out of my shirt and, just wearing my boxer shorts, I

pushed the covers aside and climbed in the bed.

For all sorts of reasons I had no inclination to explain, I hadn't wanted Eirani to see me doing this, but remembered what to do from when I had gone camping with Nicha. She might be out of danger, but she wasn't warm yet, and the best way to warm up someone was with your own warmth.

She barely reacted when I inched into the hollow her body made in the mattress and pressed myself against her, naked skin to naked skin. Her skin felt cool, not natural at all. She let out a soft sigh and put a hand on my arm. A few shards of images flowed through the feeder—black water, a sense of immense fear.

I'm sorry, Thayu.

I hugged her close, rubbing her shivering muscles.

I lay there for a while, listening to her shivery breathing. She mumbled a few incoherent words before lapsing into sleep.

I wriggled myself around so she lay at my back. In the dark, I dragged my reader onto the cover and wrote a quick and cryptic message, *What was suggested in the plan is not true. We urgently need to get the missing information. I'll prepare to leave as soon as possible. Appreciate any assistance.* I didn't dare say much more, because Renkati would be watching, and hoped Ezhya Palayi would understand what I meant, or that at least the cryptic message would trigger a reply. We needed to know exactly what Sirkonen wanted to tell me.

I put the reader aside and turned back to Thayu, pressing my body to her back as much as I could. Her skin was still too cool.

"Come on, help me," I whispered, rubbing my free hand over her arm and shoulders.

I massaged until her warmth grew heavy against me and I became too tired and rested my head on the pillow. I slept.

Strange pictures clouded my dreams. I was on a raft in a raging torrent. I had a pole to push the boat, but it wasn't long enough to reach the bottom. Water sprayed over the side of the raft, but it was hot, not cold. And I tasted salt on my lips. The raft rocked,

almost throwing me off, but a jungle vine had reached down from the trees and grabbed me around the waist.

I thrashed to break free, but couldn't. I dangled above the boiling water. Someone shouted.

Thayu stood on the riverbank, looking pale and scared. Every part of my body told me to go back. She would be killed out there. Suddenly I was on the raft again. I plunged the pole down, struck the bottom, pushing into it as hard as I could, but the raft merely stayed in position against the raging current. I yelled, "Thayu!"

She had to swim. It wasn't far, but I knew she couldn't, and I had to jump off the raft to save her. . . .

It was dark. Sheets tangled around my shoulders. Something warm pressed against the length of my body. My nose rested in the hollow of a soft-skinned neck. The scent of hot stone. Coarse hair tickled my face. Long-forgotten memories welled up. Instinct awakened and took over.

I nuzzled the skin under her ear. Breathed her scent, brushed her skin with my lips. She turned her head and ran her lips over the line of my jaw.

Multiple shivers crawled over my back. Absolute bliss.

Come on.

That scent, that fleeting touch of hot fingers. Memories too good to forget. I could go all night without sleep.

I raised myself on my elbows, one on each side of her shoulders.

My heart thudded; my hands raked back her hair, thinking nothing, wanting nothing but her. Then reasoning clicked in my brain.

Eva.

What the hell was I doing?

"Thayu?"

The sliver of light that fell into the window lit her face enough to show her lips, moist and slightly parted. Eyes were wide, confused. "You were screaming my name."

"I'm sorry." I dragged a hand over my face. "I had a strange dream." My heart still thudded like thunder, and my whole body throbbed. For those few horrid seconds, I had thought I would lose her, and that would be . . .

Too horrid to contemplate.

In the fear of dying, I had screamed her name. Not Eva, but Thayu.

"I'm sorry, Thayu." I started to retreat, but couldn't, didn't want to. Her breasts pressed against my chest.

"Don't be sorry. I liked it. You touched me . . . there." Her hand went to that soft skin under her ear, in Coldi an ultra-sensitive spot—to initiate sexual interaction.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to . . ." What was I saying? Hell, I meant exactly what I had done.

"You weren't thinking?"

"Yes . . . no . . ." And I was a coward to boot. I groaned.

She gave me a long look. "Your kind of people do something else?"

One of her hands was on my shoulder, the other at my waist. Her skin, once more hot and glowing, made me burn. Everything about her posture and words was a blatant invitation. The way she stroked my shoulder, the way she applied gentle pressure on my back. I should be sensible and get out of the bed now.

Except I didn't want to.

I leaned over her and whispered against that oh-so sensitive skin under her ear, "Yes, we do something else."

Stupid, stupid, you're engaged.

I didn't *care* I was engaged; I didn't *care* about the stiff world of Earth's diplomatic set, about their manners, their righteousness, and their forsaken belief in abstinence.

I gently brushed my lips against hers. She started, stiffened. Coldi didn't kiss. I drew back to give my feeder time to do its work, to tell her what I felt, let her feel what she was supposed to feel.

It didn't take long before she closed her eyes, breathing out in a

soft blissful sigh. I pressed closer, blood roaring in my ears, pushed her lips apart, my tongue meeting hers, hot and feverish.

She learned quickly; heavens, she responded; her breath blew a warm patch on my cheek. My hands slid down her naked shoulders, meeting her soft breasts. Fingertips trailed over my sweaty back. The feeder screamed ever louder, *take me, take me*. I hovered on the edge of that precipice.

No.

Panting, I pulled away.

“Anything wrong?”

Everything. “I can’t.”

She blinked once, twice. Another blatant invitation. I knew what would happen next. She would flush pink on her cheeks, her chest and the soft skin on the bottom of her arms; then she would go crazy, and being stronger than I was, there would be no stopping *her*. In a good and very satisfactory, *convenient*, way.

My whole body throbbed, ached to do what I most desired.

I groaned. “It’s not right. I . . . I’m sorry.”

“What isn’t right?”

She blinked those gorgeous eyes and I almost slipped from my extremely precarious position of self-control.

“Please, Thayu, go to sleep before I do something really stupid.”

“This is not stupid.” She raised her lips to mine and I couldn’t resist another kiss.

After a minute or so, I wrenched myself loose. I whispered to her, “Please—later.”

“Later?”

“I promise.” I don’t know what made me say that. Because I wanted it, more badly than I had ever wanted anything in my life.

She seemed content with that answer and settled on her side, with her back to me.

I rolled onto my back, waiting for the throbbing to subside, staring into the darkness.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. Yet, if I went any further now, I had no

doubt that the story would leak out and spread to Earth before I had a chance to—

To what?

A sick feeling settled in my stomach.

To break off my engagement with Eva. There was no other option.

In the past few years, I had mistaken duty for love. I had bowed to the demands of the Nations of Earth highbrow diplomatic set. Find a pretty wife from a suitable family, give dinner parties in Victorian-style dining rooms. Heavens knew what I had tried to achieve. Maybe I had hoped to buy their favour, my acceptance in regular diplomatic circles, through Eva. With her in Rotterdam, expecting me to come back, the relationship would never work. In the end, there was only one thing that mattered: I might like Eva, and I liked her a lot, but I didn't love her. Looking at Thayu, seeing her ear silvered by soft blue light, and feeling myself filled with the warm excitement that had not coursed through my veins for years, I knew I never had.

I was never going to be a stodgy diplomat and would never fit into their society.

And I was hopelessly in love with this crazy woman in my bed.

To hell with what they'd say in the gossip press.

I tightened my fingers about Thayu's hand, but she remained unresponsive; she had fallen asleep.

I awoke with a shock when the door to the bedroom rolled open with a clatter. "Delegate, there is—oh!"

Eirani stood in the doorway, staring at the bed, her hand pressed to her mouth.

Groaning, I raised my head. Grey morning light streamed in through the window. My entire left side was wet, where my leg touched Thayu. She still lay on her stomach, her hair a lovely mess, her face scrunched into the pillow.

Eyes wide, Eirani backed into the hall. “There is someone here for you, Delegate. He won’t—ah!”

Someone else pushed past her, dressed entirely in black and wearing body armour over his clothes.

Eirani protested. “I said the Delegate—”

“The Delegate understands.”

Shit. Ezhya Palayi. In my bedroom.

I lunged for the bench next to the bed. Empty. All my clothes were still in the bathroom. Great. One of the most powerful men in *gamra* came into my room, and I was half-dressed, in bed with a woman I didn’t even have the guts to sleep with?

Thayu mumbled something and stirred. I dragged up a sheet to cover her naked back.

Ezhya Palayi sat on the edge of the bed, showing no emotion. There was no damn privacy when Coldi were involved.

“About your message. Does this mean we’re going to get the full information from your *president*?”

“I guess so.” *We*? Who said anything about *we*? I cleared my throat, hoping I’d heard wrong. I couldn’t imagine Nations of Earth being amenable to a visit by a hostile dignitary, and neither did I wish to travel as part of a hostile leader’s entourage. “You said you were in a position to provide protection. I have decided I want the information and if I go there I guess I’ll need the protection.” *For crying out loud, mind the pronouns*. I pushed myself up on the other side of the bed, trying to kick-start my brain into action.

“I have provided protection.” Ezhya Palayi tapped his arm bracket where he carried a frightfully heavy-duty charge gun. Right—that was the wrong kind of protection. I could just see customs in the train at the Greek-Macedonian border, *Do you have anything to declare, sir?* That was even if we got that far. Amarru would surely stop anyone overtly armed. On Earth, one did *not* talk with guns.

A panicked breath, another thought. “They are listening . . .” I gestured at the ceiling, and all the things that had happened

yesterday came back to me. Amoro Renkati, whose apartment I used *wanted* to shut me up. They had me in their claws; they'd make sure I didn't leave, that I never got the data.

"My people have taken care of that. In case, you're wondering, there are plenty of snipers watching this place, too."

Just what I feared. Yet he seemed relaxed, bemused even.

"The matter seems simple to me. I want the weather data that is ours. We've asked for the data to be returned, and the ultimatum expired with no action on the *president's* part. We understand that he might have trouble recognising a writ. But I have enough of understanding being one-sided. I want you to make it clear to him that if he continues to act like this there will be consequences—"

"No. I'm not going to deliver blackmail."

Ezhya Palayi gave me a what-do-you-think-you-are look.

My heart skipped a beat. I wasn't talking to some Earth politician who was used to being shouted at all his working life; this man was an absolute dictator who controlled the lives of his people with the snap of his fingers.

"I'm sorry if I am overstepping my boundaries but I believe that is not the best approach." Oh, I chose my words carefully. I didn't say "wrong approach" because that would lay the blame with him.

"What then, do you think is the right approach?" I didn't miss the hint of sarcasm, or his playfully familiar pronoun-form. I was a goldfish in a bowl, and he was a boy in the pet shop, watching me from all around, holding me above eye level only because I amused him.

I raised my head, meeting the gold-flecked eyes unwaveringly. "I firmly believe that whatever we do, we must keep sight of two things: in the first place, in the long term, there is nothing to be gained by letting the relationship between Nations of Earth and *gamra* deteriorate any further. In the second place, and more importantly perhaps, there is a threat to *gamra*."

A small silence. The bristled eyebrows went up. Had I finally succeeded in surprising him? "On what do you base that? *Gamra* is

strong as ever.”

“Don’t get comfortable. There is an organisation called Amoro Renkati, the ones who have posted the spies and snipers you saw when you came in. They are a conglomerate of Kedrasi, Indrahui, Damarcians, anyone except Coldi, who want to move away from *gamra*.”

He snorted, not entirely comfortable, I thought. “They can do so if they wish. *Gamra* controls the Exchange. They’d be isolated.”

“They want to set up a rival network. They have the technology. I’ve seen it. They’re keen to have my cooperation, my *president’s* cooperation.”

The silence lingered. All right—this was news to him. That meant he wouldn’t know what happened last night.

“But before I decide what I’m going to recommend to my *president*, I need all the facts. I need the same information you’re seeking. I am prepared to negotiate with my *president* for this information, as long as I can have access to it as well. I believe it is part of the reason why the previous *president* was murdered.”

“Share information that is legally ours?”

“It may be legally Asto’s, but it affects all of *gamra*. If it’s warranted, I intend to present it before the assembly.” I continued to meet his eyes as a silence passed during which I wondered if he was communicating with people outside the room. I was *not* going to back down. He *couldn’t* get the data without upsetting Earth’s goodwill. Not on his own. He needed me.

“Say I agreed to share this information—what would you need to retrieve it?”

“As far as I know, the Nations of Earth block of the Exchange is still in place. I have permission to travel, but only to get in.”

I might well need some kind of military action to get out. Of course Danziger wasn’t going to give me everything he found in Sirkonen’s office. For Danziger, I was virtually an enemy. That would only be confirmed when I turned up with *gamra* protection. “We must be careful. I think it’s unlikely the *president* will want to

share this information voluntarily. Maybe I . . .” My thoughts whirled with the implication of what I was about to suggest. What was more important: my relationship with Danziger, or getting a clear picture of what was going on? Could I possibly convince Danziger of the importance? I doubted it. Not within the short time frame we had. Danziger was barely comfortable with the second wave of colonisation. He wasn’t ready for the third wave. Not yet.

So we were back to spyware.

Thayu hadn’t experienced much trouble in using and penetrating Earth-based technology. Amarru . . . maybe she could do something. “Maybe I should go in to talk to Danziger about whatever he wants to talk about, while some others . . . I could bring them as guards . . .”

Ezhya Palayi listened; his whole face showed that he liked the sound of this. “And while you talk, they will copy as much as they can in the office?”

Damn.

The words *high treason* flashed through my mind. But then again Asto probably already had most of the information, anything that had been electronically circulated to more than two or three people at least.

I breathed out heavily. “I guess that is the way it can be done without causing large upheavals.” Upheavals of the military kind, that was.

Oh shit, if this went wrong, it would blow up badly.

“That’s agreed then. Can you negotiate with your *president* for this visit?”

Not a space for a single breath when Coldi were involved.

“I will do that as soon as I get dressed.” I glanced around, but couldn’t see any of my other clothes either. “We need to decide who will accompany me.”

“May I suggest six?”

“Six guards? For one person?”

“It is a delicate situation. You will need guards even to get out

of this apartment. To Amarru, I will suggest your status at *gamra* is now increased so you require six guards.”

That said all sorts of things to me as well. My status wasn’t increased, so he meant to go behind *gamra*’s back as well, and Amarru was meant to be kept on the outside of what we were doing. Did that breach my loyalty network? I didn’t have the instinct to answer that question. This was going way too fast.

“You have six personnel here at the moment. The two Indrahui outside. I presume they’re yours?”

I nodded. Evi and Telaris. Thank goodness they were back.

“Then the lady . . .” He glanced at Thayu. “. . . my two personal guards, and myself.”

“You?” I stared, meeting gold-spotted black eyes. “As my guard?” I was tempted to ask if he was joking, but Coldi rarely joked.

I tried to parse this according to the Coldi *rimoyu* principle. Based on equal status, there would be me and him, with two companions each. No, that left one person unaccounted for. A leader, and two companions, and each of those with two companions made the total of seven. Who would the leader be? Not me certainly.

“It is my entity your *president* is accusing of impropriety. I want to speak to the man who makes those allegations and put it right.” Those last few words also translated as *put it out of its misery*. Oh wonderful. Was Danziger meant to live through this experience?

“It will be dangerous.” Oh heck, *dangerous* didn’t even half-cover it.

“We can handle the danger. You do the talking.” Ezhya Palayi took my hand in a warm-skinned grip. “My success will depend on yours. *Iyamichu ata*.” And those were damned personal pronouns.

What else could I say? “*Iyamichu ata*.”

“I’ll leave you to prepare. We’ll leave as soon as possible.” Ezhya Palayi rose from the edge of the bed and left the room.

Eirani scurried in, carrying a variety of items over her arm. My

blue shirt, a pair of trousers that weren't mine, also blue, the rigid shapes of body armour. I wondered about the upgrade in uniform, but she told me she had been given these items. She gave Thayu, still asleep on her belly, a strange glance, but said nothing and bustled about arranging Thayu's clothes, too.

Only when she left did Thayu roll onto her back and mutter, "Hmmm?"

"Ezhya Palayi is here. We're going to get Sirkonen's data."

She blinked at me, confusion on her face. Her hair was messed-up and the imprint of the folds in the sheet creased her face. So lovely. I fought an insane urge to kiss her.

"Why are you wearing all blues?"

"Eirani gave me these. Are you feeling well?"

"Yes." Her expression said, *should I not be?*

My feeder stirred. *Last night? What happened last night?*

I met her wide eyes. Did she honestly not remember?

But a blush rose in her cheeks, as I guessed my feeder did its work.

I rose, faster than I intended. Get out, before it gets embarrassing. "Just get changed as soon as you can. We have work to do."

I went into the sitting room, gulped a quick breakfast and went into the hub, where Ezhya's two guards had a projection up that identified all the places where people hid. Thayu was already there, excited about this new technology. I told her to have breakfast, but she wouldn't go until the guards showed her how the program identified a person likely to be an enemy spy from listening in on real-time conversations and parsing words against set parameters.

There were five potential enemies in the building, including one in the apartment. It wasn't Eirani, because she walked across the hall at just that moment, carrying my jacket. I went to take it from her. "Thank you, Eirani."

She blushed, and didn't meet my eyes. "I'm sorry about what

happened last night.”

“Thayu is fine.”

“Yes, I’m glad.” She hesitated and added, “I don’t work for them anymore, Delegate.”

“You admit that you took the datastick from my pocket and gave it to them?”

“Yes.” Her colour deepened. “I’m sorry, Delegate. I shouldn’t have done it. I thought Renkati would make a difference, challenging . . .” Her gaze flicked to the dark door of the hub room. “But they tried to kill you last night. They had passes to come onto the island, and wanted to come in here, when you were asleep, but I didn’t let them in, and I’ve reset the door locks now. I helped him . . .” another glance at the communication hub, “. . . turn off the listening equipment.”

I stared at her. “Eirani, I had no idea . . . I would never have asked you to risk yourself on my behalf.”

“You are a good person, Delegate. I hope you can get what you want and come back.”

“If I do, you’ll be welcome to work in my household.”

“Thank you, Delegate.” She bowed and scurried down the corridor.

I went back into the hub room, where the four guards were discussing the merits of various exits of the apartment. We were to leave the apartment under the cover of darkness. *Gamra* would be meeting at the same time, so the complex would be extra quiet.

“What about Renkati’s equipment?” I asked.

Ezhya Palayi gave me a sharp look. “Thanks to your observations, we know where they are. If they move, they’re gone. We’ll send prior warning. If they ignore it, we’ll fire.”

That didn’t comfort me much, but seemed to satisfy the others.

The planning continued. Ezhya’s staff would organise a train to take us to the airport.

The advantage of travelling with someone high in the pecking order was having your own transport. I was the only one in the

party without pilot training.

I wondered if Ezhya Palayi's distinctive craft would be recognised on approach by anyone on Earth. No doubt any Coldi who watched would know who was on board. The news would spread around the world in five minutes. It would send a powerful signal to the Coldi stuck on Earth. *Your leader is willing and brave enough to come into your prison.* That was the sort of thing Coldi did. I couldn't see Danziger travelling into a war zone to fight.

I had been warned never to underestimate this man.

And so the plan took shape. I sent messages to Danziger, who remarked that I must finally have come to my senses and reopened my link to the news services, even though he denied that I had ever been cut off.

I looked at news from a world I barely recognised. Riots had broken out in almost every city, not just against Coldi, but against people who had money and held the technology to liaise with *gamra*. In spite of rhetoric by politicians over the last two decades, the divide between the haves and have nots, Whites and Blues, *ichi* and *ata-ichi* had grown into a ravine. Wherever I went, I would have a healthy life, healthy food, and the latest medical treatments. The Blues struggled to survive. They hated Coldi, who often employed them, but whom they viewed as taking opportunities that should be theirs by right. And Danziger was a champion for the Blue class. I admired the man for that. I hated him for it, too, because it made the current situation so much worse.

Within a few minutes of the link being re-established several messages came in.

From Eva, *Cory, I'm so worried about you.*

Again, *Cory, are you getting this?*

And again, *Please respond.*

I closed those messages, painfully aware that Thayu was in the room. In Rotterdam, I would have an extremely unpleasant job of telling Eva the truth. I hoped she hadn't made too many

commitments yet. Oh damn, I was such an asshole about this whole engagement thing, but there was no way I could go through with it.

Then another message came in, from Nixie Chan: *Have finally made progress in my talks with Nations of Earth. They cannot hold Nicha Palayi any longer without attracting serious legal trouble. He will be released within a day.*

Relief flooded me. Nicha free. Nicha to come back to me and work with me, instead of . . . I met Thayu's eyes.

"Good news?" she asked. She hadn't been reading my messages, but had been working on the restoration of Sirkonen's data, because we needed a reference point to see if we had recovered everything Sirkonen had wanted me to read.

"Nicha will be released."

"That is good news." The way she said it . . .

I cursed myself. Had I learned nothing from the experience with Inaru? Thayu had told me she had a contract to go to. There was a man waiting for her somewhere. She just saw me as a plaything. She didn't care about Nicha coming back, because she didn't care about me.

WHEN DARKNESS had fallen, we left the apartment through the kitchen door. A short walk brought us to the station, where a private train took us to the airport. No one bothered our group; in fact no one much seemed to be out at all. One could, of course, blame it on the *gamra* meeting, but I suspected that Ezhya's status gave him perks which reached into places I couldn't begin to contemplate.

A casual observer would have seen a high-ranking *gamra* diplomat in all blue walking to the station with six bodyguards—two Indrahui and four Coldi. Within the group, I had no doubt whose mission this was.

There was no crush getting into a crowded aircraft, no waiting. Ezhya goaded me into taking the front bench seat while he took the controls.

Casual conversation continued.

What? I had no skill in piloting? Didn't I know all senior delegates were pilots?

I almost laughed when I thought how, when coming here, transfer through the Exchange had been scary to me. How about being shot at, and having shot at someone else, who simply collected the charge and fired it back at me?

Maybe one day, I could handle piloting.

Just say the word and he'd send me an instructor, he said. I seemed to have progressed from object of suspicion to focus of amusement and curiosity.

Stubborn puny human refusing to step back.

A secretary with quaint habits and an unnatural desire for self-destruction, Eva's father said.

But at the same time, all the pronouns were informal today.

When we left, two other aircraft took off from Barresh. They were sleek, silver shapes which I could mistake for nothing except Asto military. I tried to tell myself that it wouldn't be in Nicha's father's line of work as general to be aboard and provide backup for an operation that was meant to return his son, but then again, a normal leader wouldn't pilot his own transport either, and here I was, sitting next to Ezhya Palayi, who went through the motions as if he did this every day.

So yeah, considering the Coldi hands-on approach, Nicha's father was probably in one of the other craft, keen to blast the living daylight out of whoever held his son.



It was nighttime in Athens but the air space above the Exchange was totally empty of waiting aircraft. A couple of Nations of Earth hoverjets kept watch. I couldn't see them, but they showed up on the sensor image. Ezhya Palayi told me that they had been informed that the approaching craft contained *Mr Wilson returning from duty, accompanied by six gamra personnel*.

Indeed.

I let out a deep sigh to dispel my nerves. Either this was going to work, or it would go horribly wrong.

By the time we had shot into the maw of the Exchange building, walked through the eerily silent hall, and been led to some sort of executive apartment, the sky was starting to turn blue.

I had lived at the Exchange for eight years, but I had never been in this part of the building: the floors directly underneath the canteen, with their luxurious rooms. The privileges one had as head of government.

Exchange staff came in to serve breakfast, which I, Ezhya and

Thayu took while seated at a glass-and-metal-frame table looking out over the city. The sky was not so hazy now, and patches of green had appeared on the lawn. It was winter. I had almost forgotten.

There was a commotion amongst the guards at the door and Amarru came in, bowing, shuffling forward, her gaze on the floor. She reported in a demure voice that she had been in contact with Danziger, who was expecting me. She had arranged a private train carriage with sleeping cabins.

“Good,” Ezhya Palayi said. “Do you have a contact for the *president’s* office?”

“I do. I’ll send it.”

“Have you contacted Dr Schumacher’s work place?”

“I have.”

“I want you to contact someone in the institute, and make an arrangement for us to visit if necessary.”

“I will do that.”

“Then I want full connectivity for all of us, for as long as we’re here. I want shadow security, and I want us to be cleared for carrying weapons, or be resupplied when we arrive, or have the weapons taken to our location separately.”

“But weapons are—”

“Illegal. I know. Get them cleared.”

She took in a deep breath. “Yes.”

I balled my fists under the table. Amarru was a confident woman who knew her job. It made me feel sick to see her bullied like this.

“She is right. You can’t barge into the *president’s* office looking like . . .” I gestured. Hell, we *all* looked like we were dressed for combat. “My security can be armed, though not overly so, but no weaponry will be allowed in the *president’s* office.”

Ezhya Palayi’s eyes were hard. “We will *all* go in.”

I met his glare equally. “If the *president* is harmed, I will create such trouble that you won’t forget it in a hurry.”

Ezhya Palayi stared back at me. "And who are you?"

"I am the reason that you have any hope of retrieving your data at all. Don't forget that."

"I won't forget." But there was nothing comforting about his voice.

Thayu watched, mouth open. From near the door, Evi did the same.

Then Ezhya Palayi laughed. "You have a lot more pluck than I give you credit for."

Amarru mumbled something about starting her work, and headed for the door. I rose from my chair and intercepted her before she could get out. "Any news from Nicha?"

Amarru's eyes met mine. Her cheeks were bright red.

"How did you *dare* do that?" she whispered, in Isla.

"You and I are the guardian of peace. We both know the sort of trouble we'll be likely to meet if you let the arsenal of weaponry through."

"But argue with him!"

"Yes." Strangely enough, I enjoyed it. I'd use his curiosity for as long as it lasted.

Amarru stared at me as if I was mad.

"Nixie says Nicha will be released today. I guess he will probably catch up with you in Rotterdam somewhere."

"Thanks. That's such a relief." And it was. At least one less thing to worry about, with those two military craft in orbit somewhere, and all the backup that could be here very quickly.

Amarru left, and I took Thayu aside in a corner of the sitting room. "I want you to contact Nicha's father."

Her eyes widened.

"No, don't fool me. I know he's in one of those craft that followed us. Contact him, and tell him that Nicha will meet us in Rotterdam."

"He will?" Her eyes shone.

"Yes." It sounded more like a question. As far as I knew, Thayu

knew Nicha distantly, no reason to be so happy about his release.

I wanted to ask, but she had already gone into the apartment's communication room.

I stood there in the corridor, under the questioning gazes of Evi and Telaris. And then I had a horrible thought. Both Nicha and Thayu were about to take up a partnership contract. What if they were contracted to *each other*?

There was no more time to ask, no more time to contemplate the possibility. Word came that the train was ready, a private wagon, and everyone could keep their weapons because there would be no checks.

However Amarru did this I had no idea, and I wasn't even sure I wanted to know. I could still hear her voice when she had spoken to me before I left Rotterdam. *Our bugs are better than theirs*. That was all very well, but why were they so surprised that people had trouble trusting the Coldi? And what would the fallout be for Amarru, and why had she submitted to his bullying that she *knew* would create no end of trouble for her?

As soon as we were in the wagon, readers came out and projections of maps sprang in the air. Amarru had provided the guards with extra satellite tracking equipment.

Thayu kneeled, surrounded by listening devices which Evi and Telaris were helping her adjust.

I felt useless; I knew nothing about equipment. I went into one of the cabins and lay down in a bunk, but couldn't sleep, not in the least because I left the door open, not wanting to miss any trouble. But the only thing that happened was that Evi kept walking backwards and forwards past the door, carrying some piece of equipment, speaking into it at the rear of the carriage and carrying it back to Thayu.

In all the years I had lived at the Exchange, I had never seen the full extent of *gamra* spying devices.

Then the train plunged into darkness. Someone swore, and a bout of laughter drifted from the front of the carriage. The Alps. Tunnel.

Ezhya's female guard called everyone into the cabin for a briefing session when the train emerged in daylight. We would *all* go into the foyer of Danziger's office. She would seal the door and take care of the secretary, who would be stunned so he wouldn't remember anything. Evi would stay outside, but only so he could warn us. I would talk to Danziger while Ezhya's female guard and Thayu logged into his computers. Communication lines would be cut. She could guarantee a bother-free period of fifteen minutes. By that time, Thayu had to be finished with her electronic probing. I could speak to the president however long I needed. It was probably better if I kept Danziger occupied for longer. The rest of our group would sit down quietly, restore the secretary's awareness and wait for me to come out.

A simple plan, but totally crazy. I didn't, *couldn't* think of all that would happen if things went wrong.

At the station, Ezhya Palayi's refusal to split up the party into two taxis caused some consternation. There was no bus, so we walked.

A biting wind whistled between the buildings of Nations of Earth, carrying the last of the autumn leaves. Low clouds scooted over the city, hinting of snow, but if Ezhya felt any discomfort, he didn't show it, neither did either of his Coldi guards. Tough military men and women. I froze in my official *gamra* clothing made for the tropical heat of Barresh.

Thayu muttered, "What a dreadful place."

"It can be nice, in summer."

I told her how I had lived here, gone to school in the residential complex, and how I and my friends used to run up and down the steps until the guards became annoyed and shooed us on. It must have been hard for her to imagine how green those lawns could be,

and how lush the trees.

We came to the end of the lane where the building that held the president's offices rose up like an absurd neo-classical sugar cake with columns and arches and wide stairs all in marble. The fountain had been turned off for winter.

The appearance of six black-clad guards raised some eyebrows with the Nations of Earth servicemen. I assured them that the president expected me. They checked, and heard it was true and waved us up the stairs. All of us, *with* weapons.

Amarru was *really* amazing.

In the warmth of the hall, I breathed a sigh of relief. I thought Thayu did the same. For a fleeting moment, I remembered the feel of her cold skin pressed to mine. Never, never would I allow her to be in danger like that again.

There were more guards on the stairs than there had been during my last visit. I hardly dared look at them for fear of being challenged. Stealth and speed were going to be of utmost importance. One mistake, and all these guards would come barging in. And I would be dead; we would all be dead. There would be war.

The two Indrahui at the front parted and I proceeded onto the landing in front of Danziger's office. My legs felt weak with nerves. There were four Nations of Earth guards at the door.

One nodded. "Mr Wilson."

"My security will wait in the foyer." I hoped my voice sounded more confident than I felt.

The man stepped aside. The door slid open.

I entered the foyer.

A photo of Sirkonen hung at a prominent spot opposite the door. He looked at the camera with his usual mild expression, soft light gilding his face. His eyes, light blue and mild, seemed to look at me.

What are you doing, Mr Wilson? Are you betraying our trust? Did you read the information I gave you?

Damn, Sirkonen was *dead*. He could never answer any of my questions.

“The president will see you shortly, sir,” a woman said. Danziger had kept his own secretary, a woman of about forty.

Soft footsteps behind me indicated that the others had come in: Thayu, Ezhya, Telaris, Ezhya’s guards *and the Nations of Earth guard*. Evi stood in the doorway.

Great. Now what?

I cast a glance at Ezhya’s female guard, who returned a tiny nod.

Evi slipped back outside and shut the door. Click. The lock turned.

The secretary’s eyes widened. Her hand hovered over the comm unit. “I’ll call security.”

“Not necessary,” said Telaris, who dragged the security guard with him, one hand over the man’s mouth, his belt—and comm unit—in the hand the guard couldn’t reach. “Security is already here.”

He plonked the man on the couch and in one single movement, drew something from a pocket on his thigh and held it in the man’s face. Click—hiss. His eyes rolled back. Telaris eased him down on the couch.

Ezhya’s male guard had done the same thing with the secretary. Shit. That wasn’t in the plan.

Thayu’s reader was already on the secretary’s desk, turned on, next to the secretary’s computer. Ezhya’s female guard had another reader on top of a cabinet behind the desk.

Then the door to Danziger’s office opened. “What is this noise, Miss—”

Danziger’s hair looked thinner than when I had last seen him. His gaze went over my un-Earthly outfit and then from one black-clad guard to the next.

“What is the meaning of this, Mr Wilson?” His face had gone pale. “I’ll call . . .” His gaze fixed on the unconscious guard on the

couch.

He drew himself up, even paler than before. “Mr Wilson, I demand—”

“Listen, Mr President, this is a matter of utmost importance. I apologise for this—”

“This is a hostile act. You are in the office of the acting president of Nations of Earth. Kindly take your personnel outside.”

I said in a low voice, “Please, Mr President, this is a delicate situation. I’ve spoken to you about this before. It seems Nations of Earth has received a writ from Asto for the return of material I didn’t know existed.”

He harrumphed. “We don’t succumb to bullying, Mr Wilson.” Damn, he was aware of the writ and its meaning. “Whatever you’re doing here, I will not give it to you.”

“I am not asking that you give anything to *me*. I’m asking that you return this material to Asto officials, who have paid for it. I’m asking that you turn it over to the *gamra* community, so we can all determine what happened and what led to President Sirkonen’s assassination.”

From the corner of my eye, I saw that Ezhya was listening through a translator.

Danziger licked his lips. “Let me just get this clear. What material are we talking about?”

“A report by Elsi Schumacher of the Dawkins Institute. It’s extremely important that it be returned.” I glanced at Ezhya Palayi, wishing he weren’t here and weren’t listening. There was more I wanted to say, but I could only do so in vague terms. “I think Sirkonen knew something. It could provide proof of who his killers were.”

“You know Dr Schumacher is dead?”

“I do. I might be able to find out why.”

Some of the lines on Danziger’s face smoothed out.

“Mr Wilson, this information would interest me also. Special Services mentioned this datastick of yours.”

“They should know what was on it. They took a copy. I want that copy.”

“The copy was empty.”

What?

From the secretary’s desk, Thayu interjected, *Not empty, copy-protected.*

Had she just established that by probing the office system for five minutes? How many things could this woman do?

She added, without taking her eyes from her reader, *There’s a sequence at the beginning of each document section that needs a sixteen-digit unlock code. There’s a file that matches up with it that zips the codes in. If you copy the document, only the main file transfers. You need a security key to copy the code file. If you don’t have that file, the document self-destructs when you try to read it. Oh, you can access it, but decoding is one hell of a job, especially since you never know what numerical and notation system the makers used. This one has all the marks of the Asto underground hackers; they use the Aghyrian notation; everything in multiples of five. It’s incredibly hard to crack.*

And Sirkonen had this? Material with the signature of Asto hackers?

Only the file on the datastick we have.

The original.

The rest of this office system is mindnumbing in simplicity.

Danziger glanced from me to Thayu, as if he was aware that some form of communication was taking place. “She says the data can’t be copied.”

But hang on, back to Thayu, if it can’t be copied, then what’s the point of looking for other copies?

We have the key file. We need an undamaged original that no one has tried to read.

Ah. Stupid me. Back to Danziger. “We need to access Sirkonen’s personal workspace.”

“The hell you don’t. Not *them* anyway.” Danziger’s mouth

twitched. He probably knew, as I did, that Thayu was already into the system anyway.

She brought a long list up on the screen of her reader. I hoped she was finding what she was looking for.

“You’ll find nothing more than I sent you. I *have* nothing more than I sent you. That’s the damn truth, Mr Wilson. Whatever Sirkonen wanted with this material—weather data you say? However he got it, however Dr Schumacher gave it to him—you won’t find answers here. Don’t you think we haven’t looked? So if you don’t get these people right out of my office . . .” He pointed at the door, his hand trembling. “Before I call—”

“You speak for your people?” Ezhya’s voice sounded threatening.

Danziger stared at him, then his grey eyes met mine. “What’s he saying?”

“He asks if you are a true representative of Nations of Earth.”

Danziger straightened. “I am the acting president until the elections.”

Ezhya placed both his hands on the desk, his thick fingers splayed over the wooden surface. “You represent your people well enough. With the document you have sent to your representative Cory Wilson, you accuse Asto of planning an invasion.”

I translated more or less faithfully.

Danziger stared at him, and then his grey eyes met mine. “This man doesn’t look like a security guard to me.”

“He is.”

Ezhya’s strict instructions. He was to remain unnamed and unidentified, even though his behaviour right now wasn’t helping much.

Danziger raised his eyebrows. “His point is?”

“Nations of Earth accuses Asto of planning an invasion based on what is a two-hundred-year old plan that was never seriously considered. There is a signature on the plan which belongs to a predecessor of the current Chief Coordinator from that time. I have

run the material you sent me past the current Asto Chief Coordinator. He did not know of the existence of the plan.”

Danziger stared, running his finger along his upper lip. He frowned. I could almost see him thinking. There were some tense moments in which I feared he might say something that would make the situation worse.

Then he said, “Say for one moment I believed you, how would this end up in Sirkonen’s possession?”

I breathed out tension. “That is what we are here to establish.”

Thayu had something else up on her screen and was speaking in a low voice with Ezhya’s female guard.

She met my eyes and shook her head. “There is nothing here.”

Even though she spoke Coldi, Danziger had understood the gist of her words.

“I told you there is nothing else. What I sent you was all.”

And based on that flimsy evidence, he risked starting a major conflict?

“We need to find this material.” I kept my voice even, even though despair clawed at my thoughts. If there was no other copy, we would have to try to piece together the information from what we could find at the Dawkins Centre, and I knew that wasn’t going to be the complete story.

As for other places . . .

We had contacts for Sirkonen’s immediate family, and only one of them lived in Rotterdam. I only knew Sirkonen had been divorced. “Did he have a special friend where he might have left a copy?”

Danziger shook his head. “No girlfriends. Not that I know.”

And then I got a stupid idea. I *had* seen that photo, taken by Melissa Hayworth in her best impersonation of a gutterpress journalist. Elsi Schumacher attending a dinner in the presence of Sirkonen. I’d wondered what he was doing there, because the occasion didn’t seem to demand his professional presence. What if there was more to their relationship? That would also explain why

Sirkonen had the material. Elsi Schumacher might have had a full copy, since Sirkonen seemed to have been aware of the explosive nature of the information.

Yes, we should go to the Dawkins Centre.

On the couch in the corner, Ezhya's male guard had pushed the secretary and the security guard up straight. Both had their eyes open, but didn't look alert as yet.

"Was there really a need to knock them out, Mr Wilson?"

"Would we have been able to check your administration otherwise?"

"I would have told you the same thing: I sent you all I have."

"With the way Nations of Earth has treated me and my *zhayma*, would there have been any incentive for me to believe that?"

Danziger said nothing. I think he got the point. "I'll submit a letter of protest about this."

"Sure." Let the bureaucrats fight over it.

I continued. "Mr President, I want Nations of Earth to understand that this has the potential to blow up into a conflict much bigger than taking two hundred thousand *gamra* citizens on Earth hostage."

"We didn't—"

"The emergency council used the military to close the Exchange."

"To keep the murderers from leaving."

"The action targeted the wrong people and sent the wrong signal. *Gamra* has no involvement. Nations of Earth did not invite me to give my opinion. I was not invited to the emergency council meeting."

"Your position was compromised."

"I was being treated as a *suspect*. Nicha Palayi was treated as a suspect, without reason."

"I admit on behalf of the police that it was a mistake, but one I think they were justified in making."

"It's time that Nations of Earth understood that the conflict isn't

about Nations of Earth, but Nations of Earth is being used as a pawn. Nations of Earth is being used—forced and pushed to choose sides. Does anyone at Nations of Earth know what the conflict within *gamra* is about?”

Danziger stared at me.

I said in a low voice, “Isn’t that why I was employed?”

“You are welcome to explain this to the assembly.” Stiff-faced as hell.

“I will, after this is sorted. After that, I will return to my post. This isn’t over yet.” I met Danziger’s eyes squarely.

Danziger only nodded. “As you see fit, Mr Wilson. I don’t like you or your methods, but you do seem to have a talent for holding together a number of slippery threads.”

“Thank you, Mr President.” I made for the door.

“Mr Wilson?”

I turned.

“Just to be clear, don’t expect *my* vote. I intend to replace you as soon as possible.”

Oh shit, hell and damnation.

Danziger was going to bring in his cronies and take Nations of Earth back to the days of Kershaw. After this debacle, he might even have the numbers.

Where did that leave me?

I sure as hell wasn’t coming back here for a diplomatic post. Back then, when Amarru gave me the choice of getting out or staying, I had burned my bridges. I’d hoped, perhaps stupidly, that I could patch things up if I could solve Sirkonen’s murder.

But I was no nearer to finding proof, and now I’d been put on notice. Did I need Nations of Earth? Yes, I did, for the money. Did I fully represent them?

Well, actually . . . I represented peace, stability, mutually agreed relationships. I represented respect for cultures, *all* cultures,

not just my own. I was a pioneer of the third wave of colonisation, moving beyond the parochial interests of Nations of Earth. I *didn't* represent them. In all honesty, I probably never had.

Well, damn, that was one heck of a useful revelation that came about ten years too late.

In the train on the way to the hotel I was not the only one lost in thought. Night came early at this time of the year, and it was already almost dark outside. Evi and Telaris sat on either side of the cabin, silent, listening to whatever chatter came in on their comm units.

Ezhya Palayi sat in a corner alone, lost in communication.

I went to sit with Thayu and Ezhya's guards, who were debating the course for tomorrow. We were to travel on the fast train across the Channel to York for the Dawkins Institute.

Thayu split her attention between the discussion and her reader, which displayed Sirkonen's file in the familiar array of hexadecimal data in which she seemed to have patched more holes. She had restored two maps.

"We try to contact the son," the female guard was saying. "He lives in this town. He might have something."

Security seemed to have everything under control.

I dragged my reader onto my lap and connected with the news services. Flash Newspoint. I read through the headlines.

Housing crisis in Europe.

India defeats South Africa in cricket.

Our promise to the poor: Danziger.

I selected the last article and skimmed through text that spoke of Danziger's commitment to suffering people of central Asia and Africa. Housing for refugees of the dust storms. Water recycling plants. Immunisation programs. Education. That was Danziger all over. *Gamra* was obviously a low priority on his list. Maybe he was right about that.

He wasn't a bad man, and maybe I should just shut up and go away.

There was nothing about my visit. Nothing about *gamra*, the closure of the Exchange, or about Nicha's release. It seemed the issue had already been forgotten. The world was still turning around; there were other news issues to take up space on the anchor page.

And there was nothing written by Melissa Hayworth. I entered her name. A list of articles came up, the last of which was the one about my isolation in Barresh. That was now ten days ago. Ten days in which she hadn't published anything, or been in contact with me.

A chill went over my back. Either Danziger had silenced her, or . . . I had asked her to find information about Amoro Renkati.

Feeling sick, I sent her a message. *Am in Rotterdam, if you want to see me.*

I waited for her reply, but none came. I stared out the window, but all I saw was the reflection of Thayu and the guards at the table behind me. Ezhya Palayi had come back from his corner and spoke to his male guard. Telaris was checking the charge level on his gun.

Thayu stiffened, straightened, and pushed her hand to her earpiece.

The others stopped talking.

"Anything up?" Ezhya's male guard asked.

Thayu listened, a frown coming over her face. "I'm getting an outside signal."

Outside being jargon for *enemy*.

"Close?"

She listened again. "Wait . . . it's gone."

The guards exchanged meaningful glances.

"Are we in trouble, *mashara*?" I asked.

The female guard turned to me as if noticing me for the first time. "Of course they know where we are, Delegate. We know where they are, too. They won't move until we have what they want. But if they're coming closer, we'd best get to our

accommodation soon.”

Amarru had booked a hotel next to a railway station, in a sleepy, insignificant new suburb, one I was not familiar with.

There were three rooms: one for me, and Nicha, I hoped, but there had been no sign of him yet; one large room for the men and a smaller one for the two women. My room had enough beds to sleep a family of six. I stood there, looking at all those beds, feeling miserable. How I wanted to be back in my apartment in Barresh. I dumped my luggage on the double bed in the separate bedroom, because its window looked out over a courtyard rather than the street.

After a quick meal of take-away chicken, which we shared in the men’s bedroom and at which the conversation consisted of security arrangements, I left for the solitude of my own room.

Someone waited at the door. Someone slender, wearing a dress, and with a mass of curly dark hair.

“Cory?”

My heart jumped. “Eva, what are you doing here?”

“It seems this is the only way I can see you.”

“How did you know I was here?”

“I got a message.”

“Who from?”

“From you.”

“I didn’t send a—” I stared down the corridor. Nothing.

Thayu?

What?

Check bugs. Someone’s slipped our security.

“Come.” I pulled her into my room and shut the door behind me.

“Oh, Cory!” She flung her arms about me. It was awkward to feel her warmth through all those layers of clothing, and I noticed how small and thin she was, compared to Thayu. I pushed back,

glancing at the door, listening out for Thayu's response.

Someone was running down the stairs to the entrance of the hotel.

Eva stood there, looking very small and fragile, and frightened, her eyes wide.

"Eva, what were you thinking? It's dangerous to come here."

"I really wanted to see you. The message said—"

"I didn't send you a message. Honest. I wanted to keep you safe. Dangerous people are watching us. Please go to a safe place. I will come and see you. I promise."

"I'm not important."

I cringed. *Please Eva, don't start this now.*

"Cory, you've been running away from me ever since you left so suddenly. I don't know why. I can't get onto you. I leave messages, but you never write back."

"I replied to every message I got. Danziger cut off my communication. I've had to deal with an emergency."

Her eyes went hard. "It's always the same, isn't it? The world revolves around you and your work."

The door opened. "Hold it!" Thayu, in Coldi. She stood there, legs apart, pointing her charge gun into the room.

Eva screamed.

Cory?

It's fine.

Thayu let the weapon sink.

Eva came out from behind me, panting, her eyes raking Thayu's black-clad form, her armour, her massive shoulders and arms. Looked from me to Thayu and back.

"I see." Her voice was cold. "I received this message from Delia Murchison's office, that you'd taken up with . . . one of them . . . that you had taken her to bed."

Thayu strode into the room and passed a scanner over Eva's back.

Thayu? Any bugs?

No. How did she get in?

Eva's voice sounded far off through the roaring of blood in my ears. "I didn't believe it, Cory. I thought you were a good man, and I thought she was just trying to be nasty. I trusted you!" Her voice cracked. "You're not even listening to me!"

Thayu stepped between us, as if ready to protect me.

"That's her, isn't it?"

"Eva, this is Thayu. She is my *zhayma* temporarily replacing Nicha. She is my colleague. *Nothing* happened between us."

"I don't believe that. Tell me. Tell me to my face and look me in the eye. Then I will believe you."

"Listen Eva. What I'm going to say now is important. I want you to go home, and stay there until this has been solved. The people who sent you the message are extremely dangerous, and they're using you."

"No one is using me. I came by myself."

"But someone gave you this address."

"No one gave me anything! You're avoiding the question. Tell me the truth, Cory. Did you sleep with her?"

"No, I didn't! Listen to me and stop the hysterics. I'm trying to keep you safe."

She stepped back, blinking. "I don't believe you."

"Then don't." I let my hands fall by my sides. There was no arguing the evidence anyway. She could easily have seen the recording of me and Thayu kissing in bed, because there *was* a recording of it somewhere. Never mind I hadn't taken it any further. In hindsight, I *should* have taken it further.

Eva let out a strangled sob and hid her face in her hands. "Why Cory, why? You promised you'd marry me."

"Damn it, Eva. Listen to me. I want you to go home safely. I'll come when all this is over, and then we can talk about it."

"Talk about what? I have a life, Cory, and I don't want to spend it justifying you."

Why should she have to justify me? For her family? That I

couldn't be at every damn dinner party? It was always the same issue, always. Laying claim on my time. Demanding things I could not, possibly, comply with. And I had enough of it. "If that's what you want, fine. Go and find yourself a Polish guy who will be happy to be your trophy husband."

Silence. Shit, I'd let myself go.

"Cory . . ." Her eyes were wide. A tear slid down her cheek "You didn't mean that, did you? You couldn't possibly take up with *her* could you?"

Oh, how the memories flooded back of how insanely jealous she'd been when we just started going out and someone mentioned Inaru.

"It is not about *her*. It's about us. I'm stressed and there are dangerous things afoot, so you're not getting the best response out of me right now, but since you're pressing me for an answer, I'll tell you as it is, much more bluntly than I wanted: This—us—is not going to work. My life is in Barresh, and you want me to come to live here permanently. I—"

"I said I'd come."

"Eva, please. I'm no regular diplomat and you know that. You're much better off finding yourself a man who agrees with your father and who is happy to host dinner parties."

"But I love you, Cory." A tear trickled down Eva's cheek.

I let a silence lapse.

"You know, Eva, I don't think you do. You love a person you think is me. You love me as you want me to be, not as I am. It's the same for me. You dream of me being a perfect Nations of Earth diplomat. I dream of you heading my household in Barresh. Neither of us is going to fulfil the other person's dream."

A further silence. Eva sniffed.

"Eva, you have a lot of love to give, but I am not the man you want to give it to. Step into the world and enjoy yourself. You're young—you have plenty of time. Don't wait for me."

She said nothing, crying silently. I felt a stab of guilt. It was a

bugger of a thing to have happened like this, and I had known people were watching when I kissed Thayu, and I'd still let myself go.

"I'll get Telaris to take you home."

"I can get home by myself."

Abruptly, she turned and ran for the door.

I heaved a sigh and sat down on the bed. What a mess.

Thayu shut the door and crossed the room, silently settling herself on the desk. After a long and heavy silence, she said, "That is the woman who is contracted to you?"

I nodded, not meeting her eyes.

"What did she want?"

"To see me." To a Coldi, that would sound strange. A person did not love the subject of a contract and would not seek them out for pleasure. "Tell me, Thayu, she wasn't wired at all?"

"Not her."

"Renkati sent her the images of . . ."

There was no emotion in her eyes, no sign of understanding or sympathy. No sign that she even remembered that crazy kiss.

I breathed out heavily. My job didn't lend itself to relationships, least of all with her. Soon, Nicha would be back and I'd best not interfere with Nicha's contract.

She pushed herself up. "Well, that was all a scare for nothing, then."

Then she left the room, too.

I lay awake most of the night, staring at the ceiling.

A RATHER STRANGE procession boarded the train in the morning. I had persuaded the guards to dress less conspicuously, but that didn't take away from the fact that two of them were dark-skinned and very tall, and they still had to wear sunglasses to hide their green eyes, and that the others all had peacock hair and included a woman more muscled than an Earth champion weightlifter. Earth clothes fitted them poorly. Only Ezhya Palayi looked remotely normal. At least his clothes fitted him, but his hair gave him away. He sat a little apart from the rest of the group, fiddling with a comm unit. Something to be taken care of at home no doubt.

I sat and stared out the window, where green fields whizzed past under a leaden sky. I was exhausted, my eyes gritty. I kept seeing Eva's face, and wished there had been more time to talk to her, wished there had been the opportunity to break the news gently, if such news could be broken gently. It was all my fault. I should never have let myself be lulled into thinking I could adapt to her world.

I had deceived her; I had *not* done the right thing with her, and I couldn't possibly, ever, make up for it.

Guilt cut deeper with Melissa Hayworth's continued silence. When I decided sleep wasn't going to happen, I scanned the news services, but found no trace of her. She had a network diary—untouched since the day that fateful article had been published. Had she lost her job because of me? Was she hiding from Renkati?

One point of light had been a message from Nicha saying he would meet us as soon as we came back from York. Again, this made Thayu happier than she should have been. I couldn't stand to look at her, and I couldn't stand not looking at her, and each time I did, my guts turned to mush.

It was raining by the time we came to York. A minibus taxi took us to the Dawkins Centre, a low building on the outskirts of town surrounded by green paddocks and grazing cows.

Before going up the stairs to the entrance, I checked with security. "All still fine?"

Evi gave a single hand signal. He fiddled with something in his pocket. "There are agents all around, Delegate. Very noisy here."

"Meaning?" I glanced at Thayu.

She gave a shifty glance at the other guard, and avoided returning my look. "I think we want to be out of here as soon as possible." She used formal pronouns.

While we walked up the stairs, I felt irritated with myself. She hadn't been this formal with me for a long time. I could, of course, just *ask* her what her relationship with Nicha was. I had to face the fact: I was too much of a coward to hear the answer. I didn't want to think about her with Nicha. Hell, I was jealous even before I had taken her to bed. And I had no time for this crap right now, but my mind churned and my heart ached and I knew I had lost her.

We were already in the foyer, a light-filled room with floor-to-ceiling windows. The receptionist gave us a wide-eyed look. First at Thayu, then at me, and then at the rest of the party filing into the foyer, then back to me, her gaze raking my *gamra* outfit. I knew that look; I could almost hear her think *a human in chan clothing*. . . .

I stepped up to the counter, placing my hands on the wood in a Coldi gesture—show them your hands; they'll know you mean no harm. "I need to speak to Mr Scott."

"Dr Scott, you said?" Redness creeping into her cheeks, she reached for the phone, dialled and listened. "Dr Scott is on a call."

“Good. Then he’s here. Where can we find him?”

She met my eyes, a touch of defiance coming over her face. “You need an invitation from one of the scientists to get in.”

“Let’s just say the invitation comes from Dr Elsi Schumacher.”

She sat up straight, her face closed. “I don’t know who or what you are and what you’re doing here, but I don’t appreciate jokes like that.”

“It isn’t a joke. My name is Cory Wilson, delegate to *gamra*. What I want to ask Dr Scott is of vital importance for Nations of Earth and for peace in this part of the galaxy. Now let me talk to him, please.”

I could play the pompous-arse role if I wanted.

The secretary swallowed, then glanced at the others, who formed a black-clad wall between her and the exit. “I’ll let *you* in, not all of *them*.”

“They come with me. If it pleases you, I’ll leave two guards here.” *To make sure you don’t let in anyone else.*

Another short silence; she licked her lips. “Very well.”

She stumbled up from her chair, grabbing a keycard from the desk.

The glass door slid open for her.

I gestured to Telaris and Ezhya’s male guard. Wearing translators, they would have heard that two of them were meant to stay behind. They placed themselves on either side of the glass doors while the receptionist led the rest of us into the corridor.

We passed closed doors with high voltage warning signs, and open doors into rooms full of equipment in dust-free encasements. The odd worker sat behind a screen.

At the end of the corridor, we entered a light-filled room in which the centrepiece was an oval conference table. Each of the chairs around it faced its own little screen. A holo-projector stood idle in the middle.

More equipment lined the perimeter of the room. There were also two partitioned offices.

In one of these offices a man worked behind a large screen displaying a map of lines and circles. He was about fifty and wore a washed-out jumper over thin shoulders. He had more hair on his chin than his head.

The receptionist said, "Dr Scott, there are visitors for you."

One look at me and my party and the man reached for the comm unit on the desk. Thayu leapt into the office faster than I had ever seen her move, and slammed her hand on the unit before he could pick it up.

The man tried to push her away. "I'll call the police!"

"I wouldn't if I were you," I said in a low voice. I walked into the office. "We only need to talk to you, nothing more. Mind if I sit?"

I sat down when Dr Scott said nothing, and added to the guards in Coldi. "Jam this room; shut the door."

Evi moved to the door, shutting it in the receptionist's face; Ezhya's female guard took a reader from her pack and put it next to one of the computers in the main room. A touch of the screen, and it came to life. Thayu crouched next to her, thumbing her reader while studying the display of one of the machines in the cabinet.

Ezhya Palayi leaned casually against the doorframe.

Dr Scott's face had gone pale. "If you are looking for any of Dr Schumacher's data, you're too late. It's all gone."

"We'll see about that," I said.

In the conference room, Thayu went to work. Tables and lists scrolled over the screen of her reader. Every now and then, she keyed something into her translator, or spoke a few words with the guard.

Telaris remained by the door, a patient obsidian statue.

I waited.

Dr Scott sat back in his chair, his arms folded across his chest. Every now and then, he threw a dark glance at me, or at Ezhya.

Silence lingered.

Deleted material could be restored easily enough. If Special Services or the police had been here, which in all likelihood they had, they knew this, too. The material hadn't been in Danziger's office, Special Services didn't have it; I had a feeling we wouldn't find it here, either. With each minute that passed, the chance that someone would come into the building's foyer and discover the receptionist more or less under siege increased. We had gotten unnoticed out of Danziger's office yesterday, but we were pushing our luck to do so again.

I rose from the chair and went into the meeting room.

"Thayu? Find anything?"

She turned, and a brief expression of sympathy flickered across her face before it became professional again. She shook her head.

I paced to the door, turned on my heel and paced back again. "How much longer do you need?"

She shrugged. "I don't know that we'll find anything. How much longer do you want me to keep looking?"

Glancing at Dr Scott, still with his arms folded in his office, I decided in a split second. "Don't bother. Keep whatever you have there running. Do you have that damaged report here, the one you've been trying to fix?"

She nodded.

"Then come into the office with me."

Without a word, she took her reader and followed me, her face still so unemotional. At my gesture, she placed the reader on the table in front of Dr Scott.

While she turned on the projector and opened the report, I said, "I have a question regarding some material we have been able to restore."

Dr Scott tightened his arms closer about his chest. "I don't comment on a colleague's unpublished work."

"I understand you and Dr Schumacher got on well?"

"That's none of your business. Flash Newspoint and their rubbishy gossip. Elsi is *dead*. She can't defend herself." His voice

wavered.

"I appreciate that and your privacy, but I thought that if you were friendly with your colleague, you might be interested in something that could clear her name. It's in everyone's interest to understand what happened."

"Who do you work for?"

"*Gamra*. I'm Cory Wilson."

"The one who was in the office with President Sirkonen?"

"The very one."

"And now you come to ask about Elsi's work?" He pushed himself off the desk, looking wearier. "I thought they'd finished with that. Taken it all and gone. I have nothing to do with it. I don't want to have anything to do with it. It's bad enough Elsi was killed for this, and I'm sick of suggestions that I had anything to do with it. I didn't." He backed further away.

"Dr Scott, I'm not coming to investigate or accuse anyone, least of all you. Those matters are up to the police. My concern is with the information that went missing at the same time your colleague did. My employer on this mission is the government that has paid for this information, and would like it back."

"Then you've come for nothing, because they've already been here and have already looked."

"Who?"

He shrugged, his face a mask of defensiveness. "Some of those . . ." He glanced at Thayu.

"Chans?" Oh, how did I hate the feel of the word in my mouth.

"Yes."

My skin crawled at the hatred in his voice.

"They found nothing, just like the police found nothing and you will find nothing."

"Yes, I understand, but we actually *have* some of the information that went missing."

His eyebrows rose.

I touched the screen and activated the holo-projector. "We

don't have all the data, but we need your help in interpreting what we do have."

Displayed on the crystalline screen was one of the maps with its pretty fields of blue, green and purple. Just like Thayu's hair.

"This is one of the maps we've been able to retrieve."

Dr Scott reached out for the reader and scrolled over the map. I thought some of the defensiveness left his face. "I remember this. Elsi came to show it to me. She said she had never seen a more dramatic trend in her life. Very significant and sustained. This map represents rainfall? Oh yes, I see it does."

"Increased rainfall?" I asked, aware that Ezhya at the door listened intently to every word.

"Oh yes. In this case, if I remember correctly . . ." He scrolled through the next map, which resembled the first, and the next one, then frowned. "That's strange. It doesn't appear to be here."

"The data was damaged," I said, keeping my voice neutral, and hoping Dr Scott would go on.

Which he did. "There was another map which was the oddest thing I've ever seen, showing the distribution of a greenhouse gas, sulphur hexafluoride. At the edge of this continent here. . . ," he pointed, ". . . was a large red spot, indicating a huge concentration of it, and then in the next measurement, it had lost about a third of its size. Where is this?"

Ezhya didn't miss a beat. "Crystal Wastelands. The crater." He spoke Coldi, and I translated. "It's a meteorite crater on Asto."

Dr Scott studied the screen a bit more, his frown deepening. "Is there any industry in this place?"

"There is industry on the planet, but not here. No one lives in this area."

"No surprises in that. Anything alive couldn't possibly breathe this air. There wouldn't be enough oxygen in it."

Ezhya confirmed. "No one comes near the Crystal Wastelands. Many have tried. Some of the desert kids go there. Apparently, they ride boards on the air in the crater. It is dense and grey and

makes their voice go funny. If they fall off they die.”

I translated for Dr Scott, who nodded. “That sounds like sulphur hexafluoride all right. It’s the heaviest gas known. When you put it in a tank, it looks like water. You can float things on it. We only know it as an artificial product. Production requires free fluorine gas, which is one of the most reactive substances known.”

Asto, I knew, was extremely rich in fluorides.

Dr Scott stared at the screen again. “It’s also the strongest greenhouse gas we know. It doesn’t break down, because it doesn’t react with anything much. Its effects last for at least twenty thousand years.”

I thought I understood. In some way, the gas had formed in the crater when the meteorite hit, and wasn’t being formed anymore. “So this work shows that it’s running out, or running down, or whatever—disappearing in any case?”

“So the data seems to suggest.”

“And that causes an increase in rain?”

“Probably. Most importantly, though, it would cause a significant drop in temperature.”

“How much?” Ezhya’s voice sounded harsh, stressed, I realised.

I translated.

“Hard to say without having all the data,” Dr Scott said.

“If we provided him with new data, could he tell us?” Ezhya asked again, his eyes meeting mine.

I translated.

Dr Scott turned and looked directly at Ezhya. I cringed. “Do you think I want to sign *my* death warrant?”

Thayu stirred, staring at the screen of her reader, then glanced at me, “With permission, *mashara* advise that we move.” There was an undertone of urgency in her voice. I’d have to come back to Dr Scott later.

I rose from the table. “Thank you for your time, Dr Scott.”

Ezhya’s female guard opened the door and strode into the hall.

I followed, trying to keep up with Thayu. “What’s the matter?”

“We have two identities incoming.”

“Close by?”

“Not yet.”

“Who are they?”

Renkati.

The receptionist met us in the corridor to lead our group back to the foyer. Evi and the other guard still waited there. Thayu spoke to them in a low voice. They pulled out readers and compared screens. There seemed to be a disagreement about what to do.

I joined them. “*Mashara*, is there a problem?”

Ezhya’s female guard inclined her head. “Delegate, while you were speaking, *mashara* received a message from one of the people the Delegate wanted us to contact.”

“Who?”

She held up the reader.

On the screen was the text: *I have a bottle of my father’s vodka to give you. Michael.*

Michael Sirkonen. Our last chance, and I would hazard a guess that he was trying to tell us he had a copy of the data.

“Did he give a place to meet?”

She fiddled with the screen and showed me again.

The Station Juice Bar, Barendrecht.

“Do we know where that is?”

“A part of Rotterdam. *Mashara* is working on the details right now. If we leave now, we buy ourselves some time before Renkati shows up.”

When, not *if*, they showed up.

I glanced at the relative safety of the waiting minibus outside the entrance. Rain still fell in sheets, leaving trails of mist over surrounding paddocks. The minibus was a regular taxi and had no equipment with which the guards could communicate, so one of them had to wave until the driver spotted them and brought the vehicle to the entrance.

Two guards first, then Ezhya and me, and then Thayu and the last two guards behind her. Into the rain. Cold wind whipped straight through my shirt. Shivering, I clutched my reader to my chest. I wasn't used to this kind of weather anymore. At the door of the van, I waited for Thayu to catch up. She half-ran, shielding her eyes from the rain. Her face was drawn taut.

Horrible memories of near-death on the marshland outside Barresh? Her feeder output was blocked.

I ached to say a few personal words, but she avoided my eyes, flung herself into the first available seat.

I clambered up the step and sank in the seat next to Ezhya Palayi.

The driver closed the door, and sought for my eyes in the bewildering party of weird people. "Back to the station, sir?"

"Yes, thank you."

The bus turned onto the road.

I stared unseeing out the window. I hoped desperately that Michael Sirkonen would have the information we were after. I also hoped that whatever the meeting entailed, the Station Juice Bar served meals, and coffee, because, not having eaten either breakfast or lunch, I was swaying on my feet. Maybe Coldi and Indrahui could survive on thin air, but I definitely could not.

Next to me, Ezhya said, in a thoughtful voice, "This particular visit was very useful."

"Was it?" That was news to me.

Ezhya let a small silence lapse.

"What he said—that the surface of our planet is cooling significantly—is what I suspected—and feared. It also explains actions by some groups."

"Does it?" I tore my gaze from the sodden paddocks and met the gold-specked black eyes.

Ezhya's face looked drawn, the grey in his hair more noticeable. He clasped his hands on his knees. "Not directly in relation to the murder of your *president* or this organisation that calls themselves

Amoro Renkati, but to the larger motives behind it all.”

I frowned.

“*Gamra* has a law that none of the member entities should have repressed populations. An original population of a piece of land can stake a claim on their home territory to have it returned to them. In the past those claims have largely been granted by *zhamata*, and secondary populations, invaders if you like, have scrambled to defend themselves, and remain eligible to the network. That’s partly why Indrahui is such a mess.”

I nodded. Then a feeling of cold ran over my spine. I whispered, “The Aghyrians.” They were the original inhabitants of Asto.

Ezhya sighed. “Yes. Indeed. There has never been a point for them to make the claims, but a lower temperature is likely to make the planet once more inhabitable by the Aghyrians.”

And leave a whole planet open to be claimed by a few? That was too ridiculous to contemplate. “But they’ve been gone for—how many years?”

“That doesn’t matter. They’ll want what they think is legally theirs.”

I didn’t think that was bluff. The hatred of Coldi had been obvious in everything I had seen from the Aghyrians: in Marin Federza’s words, in the way the medico spoke, in the way they offered Amoro Renkati the technology to break away from an Asto-dominated *gamra*. “There are only—what—about two hundred thousand of them?”

“There are, but they are the fastest-growing ethnicity within *gamra*. Already, they hold many positions of power.”

Delegate Joyelin Akhtari, Trader Marin Federza.

“Most are extremely intelligent. They have technology that baffles our best teams.”

“Which Amoro Renkati wants to use to set up a rival Exchange network, and which has been used to kill *President* Sirkonen.”

“The Aghyrians have simply pushed Amoro Renkati into action. They are using Amoro Renkati as their lackeys. The Aghyrians

have time. Before they make their claim, they would like to see our standing within *gamra* weakened.”

“That’s ridiculous.” I knew: it also made far too much sense. “Something must be done against this law. They can’t just go ahead and disown an entire population for the sake of a few.”

“If the law isn’t changed, they can. The law was written to protect small populations who have been driven from their homelands. There are conditions that must be met, but we’ve tested them, and if the Aghyrians decided to claim, they could probably meet all of them. Asto would have to make huge concessions to the Aghyrians in order to maintain its Exchange. If this Amoro Renkati gets their way, there will be a lot of entities voting against us. I wouldn’t like to predict the outcome.”

I stared. There were billions of people on Asto; they wouldn’t be happy with this. “So the material Danziger found was indeed a contingency plan?”

Ezhya blew out a breath. “There are many such plans for many different places. We must be prepared for the worst.”

In other words: yes?

My voice dropped to a whisper. “Would you evacuate the entire population?”

“Only if absolutely necessary. If the climate changes are worse than we feared. If we can’t come to an agreement. If . . .” He shrugged. “Right now, it doesn’t look good.”

“Wouldn’t you . . . fight?”

“Only if we have to. But it would split *gamra*. We would lose the Exchange network, because it can’t exist without us. Without others, who would walk out, we have no trade.” He let the obvious hang in the air: Asto imported much of its food. He shook his head. “No. We must keep talking. It will take a long time, but we must solve this peacefully, with *gamra*, with independent negotiators. It’s the only way.”

Where had I heard this before? Out of the mouth of a much-too-young, much-too-cocky wannabe diplomat, facing the full Nations

of Earth assembly, most of whom were at least twice his age? A young man full of ideals. Look where it had got me.

"There are many other issues that need clearing up," I said.

"Agreed." A small silence. Then, "Such as this belief issue."

I cast him a sideways glance. Was I hearing this correctly?

"I have a theory. I think belief is a bloodline issue. It is bred, not taught. I have studied the reports from early discovery missions." The ones that had re-established contact between the various parts of humanity. "By far the majority of peoples have in their population both people capable of supernatural beliefs, and people who are not capable of such. Sometimes the believers dominate, sometimes the non-believers do. It's taken me some time, but you can track it down through bloodlines, recombinant characteristics, if you get the analysis of the characteristic allocations on the chromosomes. If you know the codes, you can tell by a blood sample whether or not a person is a believer or not. I have a diagram. I can show you one day."

Never underestimate this man's intelligence. "What about people who change their mind later in life?"

"They were always non-believers, or believers, but were forced into circumstances by their environment. They were people, like the ones on this world, who grew up with strongly believing families, but only believed by rote themselves. Because everyone else did. You can control such person when they're young, but there comes a time they will acknowledge the truth, or maybe not, but they will never believe. They're not that way inclined."

"All right. . . ."

"The Coldi are the only type of human who do not possess the believing characteristic, at all. That is not a fault. That is the way we are."

And that was pretty much what Kershaw had said, but still I saw no reason for this wonderfully diverse humanity to split.

I was lost in thought when Ezhya asked, "Would you be interested in a position as negotiator? A full *gamra* stipend, the

apartment, six staff and a generous travel allowance.”

That brought my attention back. “Me?”

“You’re on speaking terms with everyone. Your *imayu* reaches in places I can’t go. I’ve not heard a single person within *gamra* say a word against you. Even Marin Federza talks to you. Seeing what you’ve gone through, it’s obvious you can function under pressure. Besides . . .” Black eyes fixed mine. “Do you ever lose your temper? I admit, I tried very hard at that first meeting in my apartment to crack you, but I’ve been unsuccessful. Do you ever try to intimidate someone by raising your voice? Do you ever let personal discomfort get the better of you?”

I thought of that afternoon in Ezhya’s apartment, when I had nearly collapsed from heat stress.

“I will now; if I don’t get anything to eat soon, I’m going to faint.”

But I recognised a good offer when I saw one. Get a paying job that didn’t depend on Danziger’s goodwill and whims? Tick.

IN THE NEXT HOUR or so, I discovered that Barendrecht was one of those new social-experiment, high-tech, low-impact suburbs that replaced older centres which had fallen victim to the rising water levels. Built in a pentagon design around a central square with bus shelters and a tram station, and surrounded by shops. Or so the map on Thayu's reader said. Barendrecht had no train station on the main line and rather than wait for a taxi in the cold and wet, the group declared it was safe and less conspicuous to use the tram. It was only two stops along the line.

As to inconspicuous . . . when I stepped aboard, with two obsidian-black guards much taller than myself and four guards much wider than myself, a sole puny human in an unearthly blue outfit surrounded by a wall of flesh and body armour, passengers stopped talking. A mother yanked a toddler out of the centre aisle; the boy started screaming.

My old transport card of course had been left in Athens, but Thayu had given me a new one. I had no idea how she arranged these things out of thin air. However, when I slotted it in the ticket machine, the screen said *ticket malfunction*. Oh great.

I took the card out and tried again. The same thing happened. I muttered a silent curse. Where was technology when you needed it? We were about to proverbially save the planet and a ruddy machine was going to stop us?

As if to rub it in, a mechanical voice said, "An entry has not been detected. Please insert your EuroTransport Card to begin the

transaction.”

I yanked the card back out, fighting an urge to slam my fist into the screen.

The voice said, “Please leave this car and contract EuroTransport to report any difficulties.”

Oh, for crying out loud!

“Excuse me,” said a young voice in Isla.

The girl was perhaps thirteen or fourteen, thin as a broomstick, pale-skinned, with her hair dyed violent pink, and piercings in her eyebrows, nose, lips and all the way down both ears. She squeezed herself between Evi and Ezhya—the guards tensed—and held out a hand so be-ringed that I wondered why her fingers didn’t fall off. “Sometimes you got to put the card in upside down. Some machines are funny like that.”

Long fingers with black-painted fingernails took the card from my hand and put it back into the machine.

The screen said, “Welcome to EuroTransport. Please state your destination.”

Phew. “Thanks.”

“No prob.” Quick as she had come, she sat back down.

I paid for the fares and settled between Thayu and Evi. The girl had gone back to listening to music, unfazed by, perhaps used to, our strange group. Some of the older passengers still stared. That was, I thought, the division I was trying to overcome, between young and old, between people upset by “chans” and people who didn’t mind them. People who had watched Ezhya Palayi’s first official touchdown in Athens, and had marvelled, and hoped, and people who just accepted Coldi as part of the scenery.

No one spoke during the short tram ride; the atmosphere in the carriage was tense. I tried to look around casually, and studied advertisements above the windows and on the ceiling. Brand names that meant nothing to me. Advertisements that puzzled me so much I didn’t even know what they were for. Directly opposite me was an advertisement for, of all things, a cosmetic clinic. It

mentioned skin-resurfacing, hormonal hair loss treatments, foot and heel abrasion—whatever that was. The things people did to themselves. But it also offered *unwanted hair removal*—

My mind did a monumental shift sideways. I could almost feel the sting of the blunt razor on my skin.

Damn. Now *there* was an idea.

As if on cue, rain stopped and the sun flashed out, even though the wind chased brightly-lined clouds through the sky, many of them a dark shade of lead-grey.

Barendrecht Plaza, as it was imaginatively named, glittered with puddles and drops of water on stainless steel bus shelters, like something out of a crystal shop. After two days of gloom, it hurt my eyes. The biting wind, as we stepped from the tram, hurt the rest of my body and dislodged half my hair from my precarious ponytail.

The Plaza looked like it might be a pleasant place—in summer. A ring of now-leafless trees surrounded a central parkland in which stood a quaint old church with a squat tower of dark bricks—salvaged from before the rising of the sea levels? There was also a kiosk, a playground, a fountain—the basin empty in preparation for winter—and various seating arrangements, glaring wetly and startlingly in the sudden burst of sunlight. The tramline circled the park like a giant roundabout. Shops and terraces occupied the perimeter of the plaza, and above those shops rose several storeys of apartment blocks in a pyramid formation.

The Station Juice Bar was located—unsurprisingly—opposite the tram station. It had a large glass-covered seating area. An open fire glowed invitingly in a decorative bowl-like hearth in the centre of the room. More inviting still was the serving counter on the far side.

Food! Coffee!

Michael Sirkonen waited at a table in the very corner, studying the menu on the table screen. A bag lay on the seat next to him. His father's reader? I hoped so.

He was dressed entirely in black, the lush veil of silver-blond hair hanging over his shoulders. The hair reminded me uncomfortably of his father, but his eyes were grey rather than blue.

He nodded formally and shook my hand. "Mr Wilson."

"Nice to meet you."

Thayu came behind me silent and soundless like a cat. The others were settling on the next table, effectively cutting the corner off from the rest of the room. A young serving girl behind a counter that led into the main part of the building looked on, wide-eyed. Ezhya took the chair facing away from Michael.

"My *zhayma*, Thayu Domiri. The others are my bodyguards."

Michael raised an eyebrow and shook Thayu's hand formally and bade us to sit down.

"I'm sorry to ask you to come all the way out here." Michael spoke just loud enough to be heard over the rumble of a tram outside the window. It occurred to me that he looked tired and his face appeared older than it should.

"Has anyone been harassing you?"

Michael snorted. "Where do I start? All the time. I've been staying with friends since my father died."

"I'm sorry. My condolences." I could not begin to understand what a circus his father's funeral must have been, and how he would have been thrown in the limelight through no wish of his own.

"Excuse me, what would you like?" The serving girl stood at the end of the table.

"Oh. I haven't looked at the menu yet." Fancy place. I had expected to order through the table screen. "I need something solid to eat."

"A salad roll?" she asked.

"I guess. I'm dying for a coffee."

"Sure. Do you have any vouchers?"

"Vouchers?" I frowned at her.

“Health Authority regulations, sir, since coffee was declared a drug.”

Oh, for crying out loud! “No. I don’t have any vouchers. Does this rule apply to visitors? I normally live in Barresh.”

“Yes. You need the vouchers all over the country.”

I clenched my jaws so tightly my teeth crunched. What had Ezhya said again about my temper? “Is there anything else you can recommend?”

“We have the orange mix on special today. It’s one of our favourite drinks. It has orange juice, avocado, honey and cinnamon.”

That sounded perfectly . . . disgusting. “No thanks, I’ll just have water.”

I ordered a vegetarian roll for Thayu, then the girl took Michael’s order and left.

I shook my head. “Tell me, am I so out of it?”

Michael grinned, but said nothing. I knew the truth. Life on Earth had moved on without me. Orange juice mixed with honey and avocado. I felt sorry for the oranges.

“Now, let’s get started. Your father.”

“Did you get the message about the vodka?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve got it with me.” Michael glanced at the empty seat next to him. A flat bag lay there, of the type that normally contained a reader. “He had dinner with me, the night before . . . He asked me if he could leave it with me.”

Yes. I had struck gold. “How was your father that night?”

“To tell you the truth, Mr Wilson? Nervous. They both were.”

“Both?”

“He and Elsi.”

Ah—I had been right. Things were starting to make sense to me now, including Dr Scott’s hostile behaviour.

“You asked what was bothering him?”

“I did. He said he got carried away by something and he’d been

wrong, and he was trying to sort it out.”

“Did he say anything about danger?”

“Danger? My father?” He chuckled mirthlessly. “Oh, he was good at delegating, but he kept his private life close to him. *It never does any good to trust a journalist with a personal feeling*, he used to tell me. I bet you didn’t know he and Elsi were an item.”

“I suspected.” Yet it pretty much echoed my experiences with Sirkonen. “So—do you think he was in trouble?”

“In hindsight? Of course he was. But then again, he’d been in trouble for most of his presidency. It goes with the job. *Someone* is always trying to take a swipe at you, he used to tell me.” His voice sounded unsteady.

The serving girl returned with a tray from which she unloaded three plates with bread rolls—the outside covered with seeds—two glasses of water and a tall glass of orange-brown goop. Michael took a long swallow from it and set it down.

“You actually like that stuff?”

“It tastes a lot better than it looks.”

Thayu gave it a disgusted glare that echoed my feelings. Somehow, I preferred deep-fried worms. And *manazhu*.

I bit into my roll. At the next table, the girl had brought a veritable mountain of bread. It was the first time I’d seen the guards eat anything. Ezhya’s female guard was pointing to cheese protruding from her roll and asking Evi what it was.

“So . . .” I glanced at the reader on the chair. “Have you looked at it?”

Michael shook his head. “He told me explicitly not to do so.”

Smart man. Sirkonen had known about the protection then.

“But he told me a few things.” He swallowed his bite and leaned closer. “Did you know that Seymour Kershaw is still alive?”

“I do. When was your father’s last contact with him?”

“About six months ago. I read the messages. They were discussing political ideas. Then about a month or so before he was killed, my father tried to break with Kershaw. He said something

about Kershaw's claims not being true, and Kershaw was angry."

"Did he . . . did Kershaw make any threats?"

"None that I saw."

But the picture was clear now. I had been right. Amoro Renkati had killed Sirkonen, because he refused to cooperate.

"May I?" I reached for the bag.

He nodded. I pulled out the reader, set it on the table and gestured Thayu over. She pulled my datastick out of one of her many pockets and slid it into the reader. I turned it on.

A few nervous heartbeats later, the menu came up on the screen. I navigated the directory.

The guards on the next table were laughing, but I was sure at least some of them would have an idea what was going on. I didn't want Ezhya Palayi to see this. Not yet.

I found the copy of the file that was also on the datastick.

It opened normally.

Phew.

When I moved to scroll down, Thayu batted my hands away.

Make a copy first.

Yes. Indeed. The key was on the datastick. It was more valuable than the reader. A few seconds later, it was again complete in the breast pocket of my shirt under my armour.

Now for the information itself. I scrolled through.

The maps, Elsi Schumacher's report—I knew what was in there. I didn't know that the person who had passed it to Sirkonen wasn't Elsi, or even remotely Coldi; there'd been a leak in the Dawkins Centre computer.

A transcript of a meeting between Sirkonen and a couple of people unknown to me, representatives of a travel consortium with the aim of setting up a second Exchange node on Earth. Highlighted passages contained carefully veiled advice to Sirkonen not to involve me, because, they said, I didn't have the authority. Hell, I didn't, neither did they. No one decided about new Exchange nodes except the full assembly of *gamra*. It was a grave

error of Sirkonen's judgement. I knew he *wanted* to be rid of the stranglehold Athens had over off-Earth travel. He wanted it too badly—

But after a few such meetings and conversations—I scrolled through scanning the highlighted passages—Sirkonen had his doubts about the consortium. He'd kept them at a distance; he'd conversed with Kershaw directly, still keeping him at arm's length.

Representatives from Asto had heard he was in possession of the weather data and had harassed Elsi; Sirkonen had been about to send his private jet for her when she disappeared—

Conversation at the next table stopped. Thayu's hand rose a fraction to her upper arm. Someone else wouldn't have paid the movement any notice, but I knew that she kept the charge gun there, under her jacket.

All guards turned their heads towards the street.

A couple of people waited in a bus shelter. A few others lined up at the drinks kiosk in the middle of the park. Steam rose from the cubicle's counter, while the vendor, dressed in cheerful orange, moved inside. A few more people waited at the crossing, wind whipping their hair. The sun had long since vanished.

Thay?

Thayu moved her hand higher up her arm, and spoke, not looking at me. "It might be prudent for us to move to a less exposed position."

She had spoken in Coldi. Michael looked from her to me and back, frowning.

"She says it's probably wise to go inside."

Thayu urged me, "Quickly."

I thumbed the reader into hibernation, slipped it into its bag, pushed myself up from the table, still studying the square and not seeing anything out of the ordinary.

The young waitress crossed the room. "Do you want the bill, sir?"

"No, thanks, we're cold. We'd just like to move into the warmer

part of the cafe.”

“Fine. I’ll prepare a table. That’s . . .” She glanced around at all the people standing, which included the guards. “. . . a table for eight—”

A flash of light hit the window. The glass exploded.

People screamed and dived for cover. Evi shouted a sharp command in Indrahui and pushed me onto my knees under the table. Thayu unclipped one of her charge guns and tossed it to me through the forest of table and chair legs; I missed. A veritable light show broke out over my head, the crackling of charges ringing in my ears. On my hands and knees, I fumbled for the gun, cursing. My palms had just healed from my last encounter with broken glass.

Ezhya’s two guards clambered over glass-strewn tables out the broken window and ran to the nearest bus shelter. Both held a charge gun in each hand, and fired at some place on top of the roof of the next apartment block. Glass, concrete and splinters of wood rained down.

A bus had stopped in the middle of the street, rocking as the passengers scrambled to get out.

Thayu had taken cover behind an upturned table. She was firing at the top of the buildings across the road, cursing. “There’s too many of them; they’re moving too quickly.”

I still saw nothing. I might be armed, but I felt utterly useless, and guilty, being the focus of the attack. Michael sat with his legs pulled up in the shelter of a low wall.

A few tables down, a young mother struggled with two children. Her pram had toppled, spilling vegetables and a baby bottle onto the glass-covered floor. The child strapped in the pram’s harness was screaming.

I crawled out from under the table. “Come.” I had to yell to make my voice heard.

The hysterical child glanced up at me, a man in weird clothing, and promptly stopped crying. I grabbed the baby from the fallen

pram, and crawled into the darker part of the building. The kitchen staff huddled in a corner.

“Is there a back entrance to this place?”

One girl nodded.

“Here.” I passed her the child. “Take him and get out.”

The girl was so startled that she said nothing, but promptly did as I asked.

I returned to the front of the cafe to meet the mother and her older child. She cried, “Thank you, thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. Just go. Save yourself. Get out of here.” I virtually pushed all the staff and customers out the door. Michael was last. “Take yourself to safety. Your family has already suffered too much for it. Run home. I’ll call tonight.”

If I survived this.

Michael nodded, patted my shoulder, and left.

I stood in the room amidst fallen and shattered furniture, taking deep breaths to gather courage. I tucked the reader in the inside pocket of my armour and did up the fastening. Slowly, I reached for the charge gun which I had thrust in my belt. It felt warm in my hands. Heavy, uncomfortable. I flicked up the safety switch.

Glass crunched under my shoes as I stalked back to the front of the shop.

The shattered sunroom was empty, tables and chairs strewn over the tiled floor. The back of a chair had fallen into the glowing coals in the fireplace and was giving off coils of smoke. I kicked it to the floor and stamped out embers.

A flash lit up the roof of a shop opposite the square. That was another thing movies involving *gamra* weaponry often got wrong: charge guns didn’t produce beams. Their charge only became visible when it hit something. A cry rang out.

As if in slow motion, a black-clad figure fell onto a shop’s canvas awning, which collapsed under the weight. The body flopped down to the pavement and didn’t stir.

Panic crawled over me.

I didn't *think* that was one of my party; the figure wasn't wide enough to be Coldi or tall enough to be Indrahui.

Thayu? I ran to the front of the cafe. The abandoned bus stood there, billowing smoke. The shelter had been reduced to a grotesque piece of modern art of molten glass and metal.

"Thayu?"

Another shot rang out, hitting the frame of the by now glassless sunroom. I ducked, but not so quickly that I didn't see another figure jump down from the roof of the next block. In cat-like grace, it crouched behind a ventilation tower, a gun pointed in my direction.

A few flashes struck the tower from the side, leaving the figure unharmed. Almost relaxed, the person dug in a pocket and replaced the charges in the gun.

I slid the barrel of my gun on top of the stone wall of the cafe's porch. Sweat rolled over my stomach. On the tiny screen, I lined up the reference points.

Fired.

Missed.

Roof tiles flew up and clattered on the street below.

The figure jumped up and gave a shout. Immediately there was the sound of running feet, somewhere in the building above me, coming down the stairs.

I didn't think twice, but clambered over the wall into the street.

A cacophony of fire broke out over my head. To my side, behind me, on the other side of the street. I ran to the bus shelter, clutching my gun. Where was everyone?

A man on a motorbike entered the square. A figure leaped from a roof and flattened him. He yanked the bike out of its owner's hands and jumped on, then came full speed in my direction, over the grass of the park.

More fire rang out, this time from my side of the street. It hit the roof of the bus stand. Telaris leaped out of nowhere . . . into the path of the motorbike. And as I recognised the bike rider as

Kedraasi, and holding a gun, the man fired at Telaris, continuing his path straight for me.

“Cory!” someone called behind me.

I turned.

A shot crackled. I ducked, and the motorbike crashed into the mangled remains of the bus stand without its rider. Panting, I glanced around to see who had saved me. A figure ran along the street, pushing fleeing pedestrians out of the way. I recognised the man. “Nicha!”

Thayu was firing at another target on the roof. Fire came back, shattering windows.

Nicha ran and ducked behind the recycling station where I sat.

We fell into a wordless hug.

“When did you get out?”

“Just in time to save your arse, it seems.”

I flung my arm over Nicha’s shoulder. There was so much to say, but no opportunity to say it.

Whining sirens echoed between the buildings. First one and then another police van screeched onto the square. A flash of light struck the windscreen of the first van. It skidded into a traffic barrier, and the second van had to swerve. It came to a stop in a cloud of burnt rubber. The doors of both vans opened and police armed with shields and guns streamed out. More flashes hit the pavement. A dark-clad figure ran over the roof of a building opposite us.

Someone else saw it, too. A flash, and the figure fell.

The police crowded against a shop wall, holding up their shields. More shots were fired from a second floor window, but a single shot from behind our bus stand put a merciless end to that. I hadn’t even seen a glimpse of the sniper, and wondered who the sharpshooter was.

Across the square, police officers gathered up someone wounded and bundled him into the van. Evi materialised out of a shop entrance, pushing another person, struggling in vain against

his grip. Ezhya's two elite body guards brought three men from inside the ruined cafe. One was Indrahui, which earned him a slap in the face from Telaris, who'd been standing outside putting recharges in his gun. They exchanged some sharp words in Indrahui which I didn't catch, swear words no doubt.

Thayu crouched over the fallen body, searching the man's clothes.

Then I spotted movement on the roof opposite. I yelled, "Thayu!" while raising my gun. I didn't think twice, but fired, once, twice. Both shots went wide. But then there was another, from the roof above me, that struck the sniper in the chest.

He fell.

All went silent.

Blood roared in my ears. Whoever that was had just saved Thayu's life. Nicha sat behind me, wide-eyed.

I unclamped my hands from the gun. "I didn't hit him."

"The guy would have shot her."

His white-faced, wide-eyed expression sent a chill through me. I'd been right about him and Thayu. A surge of ugly jealousy made my face hot. I couldn't bear to face Nicha, and raised the gun again, as if more snipers hid on balconies.

The next moment a shadow jumped down from the roof of the bus shelter. I was too late to react, but it was Ezhya Palayi, tucking the gun back into the bracket.

"I think we got them all."

For all the excitement, the man looked like he'd been enjoying himself. Where I felt and probably looked dishevelled, he glowed with satisfaction. His hair was still tied up in the ponytail, slick and undisturbed, not a hair out of place.

He put a warm hand on my shoulder. My feeder made a rushing sound, as if someone opened a door to a room.

Well done.

I met Ezhya's eyes. Had he just opened the link without setting it up? Perfect control.

Indeed.

From the other side, a human voice said, in Isla, “That’s one hell of a body guard you have there, Mr Wilson.”

THE ATTACKERS, twelve in all, three of them dead, were Renkati, or so I presumed because none of them were Coldi, and none of the survivors wanted to speak Coldi. Besides a few hissed words of Indrahui, there was no further communication between them and our party. None of the captives looked any of my guards in the eye, and I couldn't gauge whether or not they recognised Ezhya. The police made the attackers strip off all armour and weapons which they spread into a veritable collection of non-Earthly gadgetry which they'd managed to get past the border patrols. This had been no amateur operation.

I sat, numbed and still hungry, through the questions police asked me. They had swarmed en masse into the Plaza, blocking roads and keeping curious pedestrians behind barriers.

Ezhya and his guards took their own records, and relayed some of them to me so I could inform Amarru. Evi and Telaris spoke with the police in their halting, abrupt way.

Thayu stood next to Nicha. I didn't miss the glances of mutual affection or Nicha's hand on her shoulder and then wished I hadn't seen. Jealousy was not going to help get this sorted out.

Because I was the only one who spoke fluent Isla, the police kept me busy longer than the others. Somehow, they seemed reluctant to interfere. Had anyone from Nations of Earth been in contact and ordered them to keep their heads down? Were they intimidated by the huge arsenal of weapons? Did they suspect our party included someone very important? Over my comm unit,

Nixie Chan told me that the captives would probably be extradited into the control of the Exchange soon, which meant that they would face a *gamra* court, would be stripped of their citizenship and sent to work in a labour camp on some backwater world.

I spoke to Amarru several times, giving her the names and codes of the attackers as Ezhya's guards uncovered them. They were all residents of Barresh, but there were no Coldi, and no Aghyrians.

Ezhya's words about Renkati being nothing but lackeys for the Aghyrians came back to me. Throughout the last few days we'd found no evidence for that hypothesis, not even amongst their weaponry.

Ezhya came to stand next to me and said in a low voice that Delegate Akhtari had commanded *gamra* inspectors, backed up by Barresh city guards, to raid the Renkati complex in Barresh and bring all people found there in for questioning. They were to look specifically for the new technology, although I doubted they would find anything.

I felt sick. Of course the Aghyrian operator and his female friend had long since left, long after the builders of the machine, so all the blame would fall on Renkati. Admittedly, they deserved most of it, but they weren't alone. Aghyrians got off without questioning. They weren't even disturbed in their daily activities. The medico would see her patients, Marin Federza would go to his meetings, and Delegate Akhtari . . . did she have anything to do with it? Did any of them? How well were the Aghyrians organised? Did they have a leader?

I mumbled, "We might have caught these people, but this isn't over yet."

"No, it isn't," Ezhya said, in an equally low voice. "It will be quiet for a few years or so, but this issue will flare up again, and by that time, we must have changed *gamra* law and come out with some sort of compromise." *I'd really like you to take that position. Think about it very seriously.*

I nodded.

It was almost dark by the time the police offered to take me to the hotel.

I didn't say much on the way. Now that all the excitement had been dealt with, the foremost thought in my mind was how I would discuss the subject of Thayu with Nicha, because I had to talk about it or it would get in the way of our friendship. Maybe it was better that Thayu would leave now that Nicha was back. Congratulating Nicha on his impending contract would be hard enough. There was no room for the three of us. I only hoped that Thayu would get the care of the child that would no doubt be the subject of their contract.

Still, as soon as Nicha and I started work and reconnected our feeders, Nicha would find out. No matter how much I would try to hide it from him, he would probably see how much I cared for Thayu and would offer for me to take up his contract when it finished. That was a very Coldi thing to do as well, but I didn't think I was ready for a case of girlfriend-swapping. I would do best to forget about her.

Then why did I feel so awful?

Because I was back to square one. Now potentially a diplomat with an enviable position, but without a home, a family or a wife. Not that I would go running back to Eva. No, and I had to write to Eva's parents explaining the situation as well. But I was sick of being alone. Three times in a row I had started relationships that had gotten me nowhere.

Maybe I should fill out a questionnaire and take it to a matchmaker. There were plenty of those both on Earth and in Barresh.

What did I want in a woman?

Someone well-educated, independent, with a sense of humour. Someone who didn't care about race or language, or about one's

status in society or about clothing. Someone who could handle being shot at, who could handle me being the focus point of attention, and, occasionally, in danger.

I stared into the dark street unseeing. Everything about this description screamed *Thayu*.

When I opened the door to my room, Nicha sat at the dining table, watching a news report on his reader.

His eyes shone. “I put my stuff in this room. I didn’t think you’d mind me sharing.” All his luggage lay spread on a bed in the corner.

Oh, I was so glad to have Nicha back again, let there be no mistake about that. I crossed the room and hugged him. Familiar, warm and strong. I would need to reconnect my feeder to him, and then things would be as before.

Except for Thayu.

I sat down. There was a chickpea pita box on the table, two pieces still left in it. My stomach rumbled.

“You’re not having these?”

“I’ve had enough. I guess it’s better than jail food, but it’s rather bland.”

I took a bite and struck a piece of chilli. Tears sprang into my eyes; it was easy to blame them on the chilli. I had missed Nicha and his definition of *bland*.

“What are you watching?”

“There’s some interesting news here,” Nicha said. “Sigobert Danziger has confirmed his candidacy for the upcoming election.”

“That was not unexpected. Who else is standing?”

Nicha flicked on the holo-projector. The report displayed on Nicha’s reader was from Flash Newspoint. I didn’t even register the names, but thought instead of Melissa Hayworth. I should find out what happened to her. Maybe I should take her up on her offer for lunch. We seemed to have plenty in common.

Nicha's voice broke into my thoughts. "I'll be glad when we're out of here."

"So will I."

I picked at the crust of the bread, trying to remember where I'd stored Melissa's contact details.

You're being stupid, Cory Wilson.

Melissa was a good journalist, but not a woman I should be dating, not even a woman I wanted to date. But I wanted . . . someone special in my life.

"You made a good start at *gamra*, I heard."

"What is good? I managed to upset a lot of entities." I forced my thoughts back to the conversation.

"No. Ezhya told me you did well. I heard he offered you a job."

I shrugged. "He did. I guess I don't really want to say anything until I'm sure of the arrangements. He said it would be a new position."

"Oh, it's sure all right. He told me. I think you did really well. Ezhya Palayi is a notoriously hard man to pin down. He doesn't have much time for losers either. If he offered you this job . . ." Nicha shook his head; his expression was sad.

"If it goes ahead, you'll be coming. He said I'd have six staff. You'll be one of them, unless . . ." *Thayu.*

Nicha's sharp eyes met mine. "Unless what? I'd love to come, but I don't know that the invitation extends to me."

"It does. I say so."

I took a larger bite from the pita, not meeting Nicha's eyes. The bread was cold and tasted like rubber. I longed for Eirani's cooking, but I couldn't even be sure I'd be back in the apartment. Probably not.

"But you're not happy?" Nicha said.

Was it really that obvious? I shrugged. "We haven't caught Sirkonen's killer yet. I've been in contact with Amarru, but none of the people we got today were in Rotterdam at the time of the attack on Sirkonen."

“Whoever has done it will be caught. Apparently *gamra* guards and Barresh officials have arrested a great number of Renkati supporters. One of them will have killed Sirkonen, or they will know who did.”

I nodded and took another bite.

“But that isn’t it, is it, the reason why you’re not happy.”

“I’m just tired.”

I could see in Nicha’s eyes that he didn’t believe this, but I said nothing, picking fallen threads of cheese out of the box.

Then he said, “I heard you got on well with my sister.”

I jerked my head up. “Sister?”

“Same parents as me. What did you think she was?”

“I thought . . .” I let it go. Obviously what I had thought was wrong. Not only that, what I had thought no longer mattered. His *sister*! I watched the projection but saw nothing, only felt the heat rising in my cheeks. I whispered, “I thought you were contracted to her. I thought you loved her.”

“Oh I do, but I assure you, I’m not interested in her in *that* way.” He cocked his head. “Although I’m guessing you are.”

No point denying it. I nodded, once, and felt more heat creep up my cheeks.

A few seconds of red-eared silence passed. Nicha frowned.

“But I thought . . . what about Eva?”

“I’m breaking off the engagement.”

“You are. . . ?”

“It would never have worked. She was only interested in dinner parties and when I came back. I don’t think she would ever have been happy in Barresh.”

Nicha blew out a breath. “You know, that must be the first sensible thing I’ve heard you say about women.”

I stared. Nicha had always been reserved about Eva, but he had never told me this. For the last two years, he had shielded his thoughts about her, so as not to hurt me. Oh, how I loved him. How I loved them both.

Nicha leaned back in his chair. He flicked a glance at the closed door of the bedroom—the room where my things were.

“You know my *sister* is in the shower?” He yawned. “I’m tired. I think I’ll go to bed. You don’t mind if I sleep here?”

He sounded much too rehearsed. I raised my eyebrows.

“Go for it. She’s all yours. Just don’t keep everyone awake all night.”

That Coldi bluntness.

But my heart leapt when I rose and opened the door.

A thick blanket of steam hung near the ceiling of the room, making the light hazy. Thayu sat on the bed, a towel wrapped around her, baring yellow-skinned shoulders. Water dripped from her hair and steam rose even from her skin. She was working on something on her reader. A view of the president’s office in a sickly blue hue. And then a flash. Nicha’s recording of the event. She stopped the projection and then played it again, as if she hadn’t noticed me come in.

I hesitated.

She turned to me. “I’ve changed the frequency, and I can see the light now. Is this what you experienced before?”

I nodded. “It will conclude the case neatly. Amoro Renkati killed the president.”

“But then . . . if you can see the light, why didn’t Kershaw pick it up?”

“He’s blind. He can see with the help of some technology, which doesn’t convey colour.” I remembered how he had guessed the colour of my shirt—wrong. It also dawned on me that a lot of Aghyrian technology could be beneficial to everyone, or dangerous, and that we must aim to negotiate with them, and not point fingers. Like Coldi on Earth, they had perhaps traded some of their technology for benefits needed by their community, technology which the buyers had gone on to misuse.

But I was not in the mood for discussing the matter further. There would be plenty of time for that once we returned to

Barresh.

Thayu was going to play the recording again, her hand hovering over the button, but her fingers trembled. Then she blinked.

I tried the feeder. *Thayu?*

Her input was still blocked, and, unlike Ezhya, I couldn't open it without setting it up through the reader.

"Thayu?"

"Are you still angry with me?"

"Angry? Why would I be angry with you?"

"Because I made your girl run out on you."

Oh, Thayu.

She gave a surprised squeak when I pulled her up and drew her in my arms. From close up, her eyes glistened with moisture.

"Come, come, Thayu. Open your feeder. Let me tell you what's going on." *How much I love you.*

"What—"

My lips cut her words short.

She must have been standing under the hot shower for ages; her mouth was so hot it nearly burned me, but I didn't care.

A progression of vague images spread from my feeder, getting clearer while I focused on them. Her horror as she realised she had interfered between me and Eva, as she realised that she must have done something very bad in our custom, but not understanding it. Bewilderment, regret. Love.

Love. Like a warmth seeping through me, tingling to the very tips of my fingers.

"Thayu, I would never be angry with you, because it would never have worked out with Eva. It took me to meet you before I realised that."

"I thought you were contracted to her?"

"Not anymore."

"You mustn't throw away your chances, the status she was offering you."

"I'm not interested in that type of status."

She just blinked.

"I'm serious, I'm not. She's part of a world that isn't mine. I was mistaken. I want you, and if . . ." I swallowed hard. "If that means I have to buy the other man out, I will do so."

She looked up at me, her eyes blinking. "Really?"

"Really. Is he old and ugly?"

"Yes. But rich."

I heard the warning in those words. "I will pay him out, no matter what."

She blinked hard, and more tears formed in her eyes. It was so unlike her that I kissed them away; the tangy taste of her on my lips.

I felt a twinge of fear through the feeder. She asked, her voice hoarse, "For how long?"

"If you want, forever. If you want a child, we'll get around that problem somehow. I don't want to lose you."

She raised her head and met my eyes. I lost myself in her gaze. Her voice was no more than a whisper. "I'd like that very much."

After that, neither of us said anything for a long time.

I shut down the projection, still flushed with the rush of excitement.

Those two thousand delegates of *zhamata* sat in stunned silence.

No protests, no shouts, just total shocked silence. My words about Sirkonen's troubles, his murder, Danziger's discovery and Renkati's plan and their machine still echoed in my ears. I'd shown them the two-hundred-year-old plans, verified the signature of Asto's leader of that time. How Renkati had tried to play the climate change data to make Nations of Earth vote against collaboration with *gamra*. I had even raised the subject of how Asto could become the subject of a territory claim. That there was an urgent need to revise the *gamra* membership laws.

There was not one delegate I could see from my position who hadn't had something to yell at some stage, but now I had finished, everyone was quiet.

A group of about thirty people sat on the floor in the middle of the hall, between the speaker's dais and the lowest tiers of the audience. Two Barresh city guards in black stood on either side. A few more guards sat on the lowest bench. They had brought the group in after the meeting started, a collection of men and women in dirty clothing.

Chief Delegate Akhtari rang her bell. Her face had remained emotionless during my speech. I didn't think she was involved in any Aghyrian plan or even knew of it, but it would have been nice if she had shown outrage at my evidence. She was meant to remain impartial, and so far, she had done just that, which meant I still didn't know how deep the Aghyrian involvement ran. Would we ever know? Would they ever make their claim? Had they deliberately set up Amoro Renkati with their technology? How organised were they?

I repositioned the earpiece. "And in this way, Delegates, a small organisation almost succeeded in driving a wedge within the heart of *gamra*. Some of you may say why does that matter? We need to have a discussion about the structure of *gamra* anyway. They might have said *we need to end the domination of Asto and curb the power of the Coldi*. Some of you—many of you maybe—might have agreed."

Ezhya Palayi sat quietly, his hands in his lap.

"Amoro Renkati heard these voices of dissent and, while *gamra* wasn't looking, gathered a group driven by hatred. They attempted to court non-Coldi entities to form their separate network. I don't think we have seen the end of this. We have seen the technology they've used and I don't think it's going to go away."

I glanced at Marin Federza, whose face was equally unreadable. Was there an organisation of Aghyrians? If so, was he involved?

"Rather than pointing fingers at each other, *gamra* needs to face this challenge as a united front. I think it matters that we air

grievances publicly, here in this venue, before they become deeply ingrained. We have just seen how quickly a conflict can escalate. I have no doubt that if we did allow this split to happen, we would have major conflict within a year.”

Now for the official part of the meeting.

“At the start of this meeting, you saw the guards of Barresh bring in a group of people. They are what is left of Amoro Renkati, those people who still swear by an organisation with the blood of my *president* on its hands. Now only one question remains, and I have been chosen to ask it on behalf of *zhamata*.”

A few of the people in the group on the floor looked up.

“*Gamra* law gives you the opportunity to answer freely and escape a forceful investigation and detention for those of you not guilty. Out of all of you here, whose hand killed the president?”

In the group, no one looked at one another. People sat with their shoulders slumped. I felt a twinge of disappointment. It had probably been too naïve to hope that anyone would come forward. But then there was a commotion in the group. Someone rose. A thin figure, a middle-aged man. Greying hair.

Seymour Kershaw. His vacant eyes stared in the distance.

“I did.”

His voice carried in the hall.

He said again, “I did.” He laughed. “I killed the backstabbing bastard. He was going to run off with data some of us risked our lives getting for him.”

I had never heard him speak Coldi, and he did so with a heavy accent, loathsome almost, but it was his face that disturbed me most. An expression of pure hatred.

Kershaw continued, “The Coldi have used, screwed and betrayed us for hundreds of years. *Gamra* as well as my home world. They will never share power. They must be stopped.” He pointed at Ezhya Palayi; he had something in his hand.

I didn’t think twice. I pulled the charge gun from under my shirt and fired. Once. Twice. No, that second shot came from

Thayu.

Both blue flashes hit the standing figure. Crackled like lightning. Gave off a cloud of steam.

People screamed and scrambled from their seats. The guards shouted, pulled weapons. Restrained the Renkati members who tried to run.

Lights went on overhead.

When the panic had cleared, one figure remained on the floor. Thayu sprang over the railing and knelt next to the prone figure.

Breathing deeply, I clicked the weapon back into its bracket. The barrel was hot. I swallowed hard and for a moment felt like I would faint or throw up. "Is he. . . ?"

Thayu rose and nodded. "Bitter old man."

I steadied myself against the dais, fighting my rebelling stomach. I had pulled a weapon on a fellow human, and *killed*.

Thayu's warm thoughts touched my mind. *Really, you did well. That was a shot worthy of a sniper.*

But what if I'd missed?

What if he'd killed Ezhya Palayi?

I gulped deep breaths. The hall's floor had become a seething mass of people, most of them security.

Everyone had failed Kershaw. The wrong candidate for the job, he had received little training and not enough physical preparation. Without adaptation, Seymour Kershaw had gone blind, and the lack of support had made him bitter, making him easy prey for Renkati.

The best I could do for him was to make sure I succeeded.

A humidity-laden breeze stirred the curtain. I leaned back in my chair, reading once more over the text on the screen.

To Sigobert Danziger, acting president, Nations of Earth,

It is with regret that I report I have found the remains of previous Earth envoy Seymour Kershaw, which I hope you will

clear to be returned to his family.

It was still uncomfortable to think of what had happened, and something I would have to explain to Danziger, but not now.

I send some pictures as proof of identity. I advise you against displaying them in the general assembly—the detail is gruesome and might upset some members. Before his death, Kershaw admitted to having used new technology to kill President Sirkonen, who had been about to reveal the extent of Renkati's treachery. All known members of the organisation Amoro Renkati have been arrested. There is no further threat to Nations of Earth. Gamra wishes to apologise deeply for this upheaval, but hopes that normal negotiations will resume.

Meanwhile, I wish to notify you of my intention to resign from my position. I have been offered a fully funded position as negotiator, but will be available to offer assistance to my replacement. . . .

Oh, how it pleased me to write that. He'd threatened to sack me, and now I'd made the first move, a move which he probably wouldn't have expected. Yesterday I'd made my first down payment for the apartment which had been seized by *gamra* as part of the disbanding of Amoro Renkati. I'd also paid the staff outstanding wages. Money never interested me much, but I had never felt so good. And there was more to come.

I flicked to the other message.

Ms Hayworth,

I hope you have arrived in Athens by now. Amarru said she has been awaiting your arrival so your training as my publicity officer can be fast-tracked—

A light flicked on behind me, and soft footsteps entered the room. A yellow-skinned hand placed a steaming cup of *manazhu* between the edge of the table and my reader; its tantalising smell rose to my nose.

I reached over my shoulder, and found Thayu's arm.

"I thought you might like this before we go to bed."

The glow from the reader silvered the soft curves of her face.

“Bed? Is it that late?”

“It is. You do forget yourself sometimes. You work too hard.”

She said that a lot, in a mocking-joking way, but it was true. In the past few days, I’d spent far too much time in the semi-darkness of the communication hub. I would become anaemic at this rate.

I half-rose and pressed “send” and again “send”.

Then I picked up my cup and followed Thayu out of the room. My new office, my staff and the problems of the universe could wait a while. The night was warm and there were better things to do.



Thank you for reading Ambassador 1: Seeing Red. In the next book in the series *The Sahara Conspiracy*, an aid worker in Djibouti discovers smuggled Coldi weapons. Vice President Danziger asks Cory a “please explain”. Cory investigates, but the solution is neither easy nor tidy.

Get Ambassador 1A: *The Sahara Conspiracy* [here](#).

About the Author

Patty Jansen lives in Sydney, Australia, where she spends most of her time writing Science Fiction and Fantasy.

Her story *This Peaceful State of War* placed first in the second quarter of the Writers of the Future contest and was published in their 27th anthology. She has also sold fiction to genre magazines such as *Analog Science Fiction and Fact*, *Redstone SF* and *Aurealis*.

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